All Stories Complete

Weird Tales

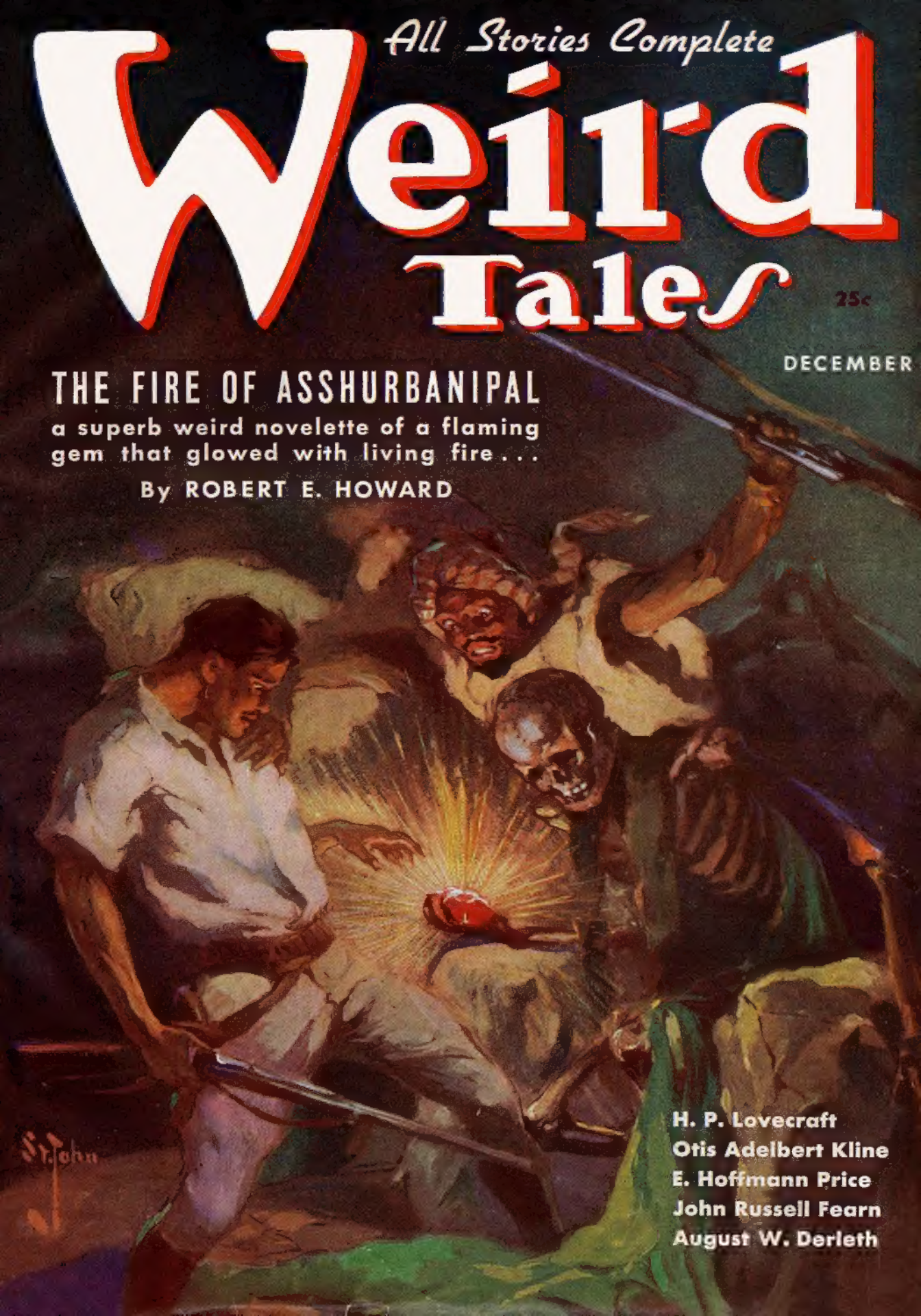
25c

DECEMBER

THE FIRE OF ASSHURBANIPAL

a superb weird novelette of a flaming gem that glowed with living fire . . .

By ROBERT E. HOWARD



H. P. Lovecraft
Otis Adelbert Kline
E. Hoffmann Price
John Russell Fearn
August W. Derleth

COMING NEXT MONTH

THE door communicating from the outer lobby to the club's wide entrance stairs was built of heavy mortised timbers—a relic of the Prohibition days when ax-armed raiders might swoop down upon the place unheralded—and these were overlaid with a smooth coat of bright vermilion lacquer on which were painted golden dragons in the Chinese manner. Bone-white against this brilliant background, crucified with railway spikes, hung the naked body of a girl. From nail-pierced hands and feet small rivulets of bright-red blood writhed down like ruby-colored worms. In haste, perhaps, the slayers had neglected to strip off both her sandals, so that one foot showed gilt cross-straps on each side of the cruel spike which held it to the painted door, while the other was unclothed except for the stigmata of bright blood which ran down from the pierced instep.

In the orange glow of a great Chinese lantern she hung against the red and golden panels in a hush of horror; yet she made a picture of appealing, tragic beauty. Her long, slim limbs, the slender waist, the hips which swelled in gracious curves, were beautiful as anything shaped by a master sculptor. Her breasts, drawn upward by the outstretched arms, were lovely as twin hemispheres of alabaster jeweled with coral. Her head had fallen forward in the utter flaccidness of death, and the fine, bright hair cascaded downward from her brow, veiling the horror of half-closed, glazing eyes and limp lips fallen open.

Upon the Peking-blue of the rich Chinese rug spread on the floor before her the sandal she had lost gleamed emptily upon its side, its buckle broken, its golden heel and instep straps ripped almost clear away from the gilt sole. Somehow, death seemed incongruous here. In this resort of opulent magnificence, this temple dedicated to enjoyment of the vanities of life, death was as out of place as a murder scene injected in a Johann Strauss operetta. An odd place, surely, for a woman to be crucified! . . .

The pitiful story of what happened to this martyred girl, and the weird events that followed, make an eery story of unusual thrill and gripping interest, which you cannot afford to miss. It will be published complete in the January issue of WEIRD TALES:

Children of the Bat

By SEABURY QUINN

—Also—

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By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A powerful tale by one of the supreme masters of weird fiction—a tale in which the horror creeps and grows, to spring at last upon the reader in all its hideous totality.

THE WOMAN IN ROOM 607
By THORP MCCLUSKY

A strange, weird tale about a woman who clung too closely to life—a story about the morbid horror that flowed out from under the door of a room in the Hotel Northrup.

THE HEADLESS MILLER OF KOBOLD'S KEEP
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January WEIRD TALES . . . . Out December 1

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, $2.50; Canada, $2.75; elsewhere, $3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Fire of Asshurbanipal

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

The tale of a silent dead sea of black stone set in the drifting sands of the desert, and of a flaming gem clutched in the bony fingers of a skeleton on an ancient throne

YAR ALI squinted carefully down the blue barrel of his Lee-Enfield, called devoutly on Allah and sent a bullet through the brain of a flying rider.

"Allaho akbar!"

The big Afghan shouted in glee, waving his weapon above his head, "God is great! By Allah, *sahib,* I have sent another one of the dogs to Hell!"

His companion peered cautiously over the rim of the sand-pit they had scooped with their hands. He was a lean and wiry American, Steve Clarney by name.

"Good work, old horse," said this person. "Four left. Look—they're drawing off."

● Robert E. Howard is dead, but his genius lives on in his fascinating, vivid stories. He had the knack of depicting his characters in action so that they stepped out of the printed page and gripped the sympathies of the readers—Conan the barbarian adventurer—Solomon Kane, the dour Puritan soldier and redresser of wrongs—King Kull, the valiant fighter from the shadowy kingdoms of the world's dawn—heroes all, and doughty men of might. The posthumous weird tale by Mr. Howard presented here, "The Fire of Asshurbanipal," is an outre adventure story of much power. We commend it to you.

The white-robed horsemen were indeed reining away, clustering together just out of accurate rifle-range, as if in council. There had been seven when they had first swooped down on the comrades, but the fire from the two rifles in the sand-pit had been deadly.

"Look, *sahib*—they abandon the fray!"

Yar Ali stood up boldly and shouted taunts at the departing riders, one of whom whirled and sent a bullet that kicked up sand thirty feet in front of the pit.

"They shoot like the sons of dogs," said Yar Ali in complacent self-esteem. "By Allah, did you see that rogue plunge from his saddle as my lead went home? Up, *sahib;* let us run after them and cut them down!"

Paying no attention to this outrageous proposal—for he knew it was but one of the gestures Afghan nature continually demands—Steve rose, dusted off his breeches and gazing after the riders, now white specks far out on the desert, said musingly: "Those fellows ride as if they had some set purpose in mind—not a bit like men running from a licking."

"Aye," agreed Yar Ali promptly and seeing nothing inconsistent with his present attitude and recent bloodthirsty suggestion, "they ride after more of their kind—they are hawks who give up their prey not quickly. We had best move our position quickly, Steve *sahib.* They will come back—maybe in a few hours, maybe in a few days—it all depends on how

"If he looked, if he opened his eyes, he knew that stark black madness would be his instant lot."

far away lies the oasis of their tribe. But they will be back. We have guns and lives—they want both. And behold."

The Afghan levered out the empty shell and slipped a single cartridge into the breech of his rifle.

"My last bullet, *sahib.*"

Steve nodded. "I've got three left."

The raiders whom their bullets had knocked from the saddle had been looted by their own comrades. No use searching the bodies which lay in the sand for ammunition. Steve lifted his canteen and shook it. Not much water remained. He knew that Yar Ali had only a little more than he, though the big Afridi, bred in a barren land, had used and needed less water than did the American; although the latter, judged from a white man's standards, was hard and tough as a wolf. As Steve unscrewed the canteen cap and drank very sparingly, he mentally reviewed the chain of events that had led them to their present position.

Wanderers, soldiers of fortune, thrown together by chance and attracted to each other by mutual admiration, he and Yar Ali had wandered from India up through Turkistan and down through Persia, an oddly assorted but highly capable pair. Driven by the restless urge of inherent wanderlust, their avowed purpose—which they swore to and sometimes believed themselves—was the accumulation of some vague and undiscovered treasure, some pot of gold at the foot of some yet unborn rainbow.

Then in ancient Shiraz they had heard of the Fire of Asshurbanipal. From the lips of an ancient Persian trader, who only half believed what he repeated to them, they heard the tale that he in turn had heard from the babbling lips of delirium, in his distant youth. He had been a member of a caravan, fifty years before, which, wandering far on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf trading for pearls, had followed the tale of a rare pearl far into the desert.

The pearl, rumored found by a diver and stolen by a shaykh of the interior, they did not find, but they did pick up a Turk who was dying of starvation, thirst and a bullet wound in the thigh. As he died in delirium, he babbled a wild tale of a silent dead city of black stone set in the drifting sands of the desert far to the westward, and of a flaming gem clutched in the bony fingers of a skeleton on an ancient throne.

He had not dared bring it away with him, because of an overpowering brood-

ing horror that haunted the place, and thirst had driven him into the desert again, where Bedouins had pursued and wounded him. Yet he had escaped, riding hard until his horse fell under him. He died without telling how he had reached the mythical city in the first place, but the old trader thought he must have come from the northwest—a deserter from the Turkish army, making a desperate attempt to reach the Gulf.

The men of the caravan had made no attempt to plunge still further into the desert in search of the city; for, said the old trader, they believed it to be the ancient, ancient City of Evil spoken of in the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab Alhazred—the city of the dead on which an ancient curse rested. Legends named it vaguely: the Arabs called it *Beled-el-Djinn,* the City of Devils, and the Turks, *Kara-Shehr,* the Black City. And the gem was that ancient and accursed jewel belonging to a king of long ago, whom the Grecians called Sardanapalus and the Semitic peoples Asshurbanipal.

STEVE had been fascinated by the tale. Admitting to himself that it was doubtless one of the ten thousand cock-and-bull myths mooted about the East, still there was a possibility that he and Yar Ali had stumbled onto a trace of that pot of rainbow gold for which they searched. And Yar Ali had heard hints before of a silent city of the sands; tales had followed the eastbound caravans over the high Persian uplands and across the sands of Turkistan, into the mountain country and beyond—vague tales, whispers of a black city of the djinn, deep in the hazes of a haunted desert.

So, following the trail of the legend, the companions had come from Shiraz to a village on the Arabian shore of the Persian Gulf, and there had heard more from an old man who had been a pearl-diver in his youth. The loquacity of age was on him and he told tales repeated to him by wandering tribesmen who had them in turn from the wild nomads of the deep interior; and again Steve and Yar Ali heard of the still black city with giant beasts carved of stone, and the skeleton sultan who held the blazing gem.

And so, mentally swearing at himself for a fool, Steve had made the plunge, and Yar Ali, secure in the knowledge that all things lay on the lap of Allah, had come with him. Their scanty supply of money had been just sufficient to provide riding-camels and provisions for a bold flying invasion of the unknown. Their only chart had been the vague rumors that placed the supposed location of Kara-Shehr.

There had been days of hard travel, pushing the beasts and conserving water and food. Then, deep in the desert they invaded, they had encountered a blinding sand-wind in which they had lost the camels. After that came long miles of staggering through the sands, battered by a flaming sun, subsisting on rapidly dwindling water from their canteens, and food Yar Ali had in a pouch. No thought of finding the mythical city now. They pushed on blindly, in hope of stumbling upon a spring; they knew that behind them no oases lay within a distance they could hope to cover on foot. It was a desperate chance, but their only one.

Then white-clad hawks had swooped down on them, out of the haze of the skyline, and from a shallow and hastily scooped trench the adventurers had exchanged shots with the wild riders who circled them at top speed. The bullets of the Bedouins had skipped through their makeshift fortifications, knocking dust into their eyes and flicking bits of

cloth from their garments, but by good chance neither had been hit.

Their one bit of luck, reflected Clarney, as he cursed himself for a fool. What a mad venture it had been, anyway! To think that two men could so dare the desert and live, much less wrest from its abysmal bosom the secrets of the ages! And that crazy tale of a skeleton hand gripping a flaming jewel in a dead city—bosh! What utter rot! He must have been crazy himself to credit it, the American decided with the clarity of view that suffering and danger bring.

"Well, old horse," said Steve, lifting his rifle, "let's get going. It's a toss-up if we die of thirst or get sniped off by the desert-brothers. Anyway, we're doin' no good here."

"God gives," agreed Yar Ali cheerfully. "The sun sinks westward. Soon the coolness of night will be upon us. Perhaps we shall find water yet, *sahib.* Look, the terrain changes to the south."

Clarney shaded his eyes against the dying sun. Beyond a level, barren expanse of several miles width, the land did indeed become more broken; aborted hills were in evidence. The American slung his rifle over his arm and sighed.

"Heave ahead; we're food for the buzzards anyhow."

THE sun sank and the moon rose, flooding the desert with weird silver light. Drifted sand glimmered in long ripples, as if a sea had suddenly been frozen into immobility. Steve, parched fiercely by a thirst he dared not fully quench, cursed beneath his breath. The desert was beautiful beneath the moon, with the beauty of a cold marble lorelei to lure men to destruction. What a mad quest! his weary brain reiterated; the Fire of Asshurbanipal retreated into the mazes of unreality with each dragging step. The desert became not merely a material wasteland, but the gray mists of the lost eons, in whose depths dreamed sunken things.

Clarney stumbled and swore; was he failing already? Yar Ali swung along with the easy, tireless stride of the mountain man, and Steve set his teeth, nerving himself to greater effort. They were entering the broken country at last, and the going became harder. Shallow gullies and narrow ravines knifed the earth with wavering patterns. Most of them were nearly filled with sand, and there was no trace of water.

"This country was once oasis country," commented Yar Ali. "Allah knows how many centuries ago the sand took it, as the sand has taken so many cities in Turkistan."

They swung on like dead men in a gray land of death. The moon grew red and sinister as she sank, and shadowy darkness settled over the desert before they had reached a point where they could see what lay beyond the broken belt. Even the big Afghan's feet began to drag, and Steve kept himself erect only by a savage effort of will. At last they toiled up a sort of ridge, on the southern side of which the land sloped downward.

"We rest," declared Steve. "There's no water in this hellish country. No use in goin' on for ever. My legs are stiff as gun-barrels. I couldn't take another step to save my neck. Here's a kind of stunted cliff, about as high as a man's shoulder, facing south. We'll sleep in the lee of it."

"And shall we not keep watch, Steve *sahib?*"

"We don't," answered Steve. "If the Arabs cut our throats while we're asleep, so much the better. We're goners anyhow."

With which optimistic observation Clarney lay down stiffly in the deep sand. But Yar Ali stood, leaning forward,

straining his eyes into the elusive darkness that turned the star-flecked horizons to murky wells of shadow.

"Something lies on the skyline to the south," he muttered uneasily. "A hill? I cannot tell, or even be sure that I see anything at all."

"You're seeing mirages already," said Steve irritably. "Lie down and sleep."

And so saying Steve slumbered.

The sun in his eyes awoke him. He sat up, yawning, and his first sensation was that of thirst. He lifted his canteen and wet his lips. One drink left. Yar Ali still slept. Steve's eyes wandered over the southern horizon and he started. He kicked the recumbent Afghan.

"Hey, wake up, Ali. I reckon you weren't seeing things after all. There's your hill—and a queer-lookin' one, too."

The Afridi woke as a wild thing wakes, instantly and completely, his hand leaping to his long knife as he glared about for enemies. His gaze followed Steve's pointing fingers and his eyes widened.

"By Allah and by Allah!" he swore. "We have come into a land of djinn! That is no hill—it is a city of stone in the midst of the sands!"

Steve bounded to his feet like a steel spring released. As he gazed with bated breath, a fierce shout escaped his lips. At his feet the slope of the ridge ran down into a wide and level expanse of sand that stretched away southward. And far away, across those sands, to his straining sight the "hill" slowly took shape, like a mirage growing from the drifting sands.

He saw great uneven walls, massive battlements; all about crawled the sands like a living, sensate thing, drifted high about the walls, softening the rugged outlines. No wonder that at first glance the whole had appeared like a hill.

"Kara-Shehr!" Clarney exclaimed fiercely. "Beled-el-Djinn! The city of the dead! It wasn't a pipe-dream after all! We've found it—by Heaven, we've found it! Come on! Let's go!"

YAR ALI shook his head uncertainly and muttered something about evil djinn under his breath, but he followed. The sight of the ruins had swept from Steve his thirst and hunger, and the fatigue that a few hours' sleep had not fully overcome. He trudged on swiftly, oblivious to the rising heat, his eyes gleaming with the lust of the explorer. It was not altogether greed for the fabled gem that had prompted Steve Clarney to risk his life in that grim wilderness; deep in his soul lurked the age-old heritage of the white man, the urge to seek out the hidden places of the world, and that urge had been stirred to the depths by the ancient tales.

Now as they crossed the level wastes that separated the broken land from the city, they saw the shattered walls take clearer form and shape, as if they grew out of the morning sky. The city seemed built of huge blocks of black stone, but how high the walls had been there was no telling because of the sand that drifted high about their base; in many places they had fallen away and the sand hid the fragments entirely.

The sun reached her zenith and thirst intruded itself in spite of zeal and enthusiasm, but Steve fiercely mastered his suffering. His lips were parched and swollen, but he would not take that last drink until he had reached the ruined city. Yar Ali wet his lips from his own canteen and tried to share the remainder with his friend. Steve shook his head and plodded on.

In the ferocious heat of the desert afternoon they reached the ruin, and passing through a wide breach in the crumbling wall, gazed on the dead city.

Sand choked the ancient streets and lent fantastic form to huge, fallen and half-hidden columns. So crumbled into decay and so covered with sand was the whole that the explorers could make out little of the original plan of the city; now it was but a waste of drifted sand and crumbling stone over which brooded, like an invisible cloud, an aura of unspeakable antiquity.

But directly in front of them ran a broad avenue, the outline of which not even the ravaging sands and winds of time had been able to efface. On either side of the wide way were ranged huge columns, not unusually tall, even allowing for the sand that hid their bases, but incredibly massive. On the top of each column stood a figure carved from solid stone — great, somber images, half human, half bestial, partaking of the brooding brutishness of the whole city. Steve cried out in amazement.

"The winged bulls of Nineveh! The bulls with men's heads! By the saints, Ali, the old tales are true! The Assyrians did build this city! The whole tale's true! They must have come here when the Babylonians destroyed Assyria—why, this scene's a dead ringer for pictures I've seen—reconstructed scenes of old Nineveh! And look!"

He pointed down the broad street to the great building which reared at the other end, a colossal, brooding edifice whose columns and walls of solid black stone blocks defied the winds and sands of time. The drifting, obliterating sea washed about its foundations, overflowing into its doorways, but it would require a thousand years to inundate the whole structure.

"An abode of devils!" muttered Yar Ali, uneasily.

"The temple of Baal!" exclaimed Steve. "Come on! I was afraid we'd find all the palaces and temples hidden by the sand and have to dig for the gem."

"Little good it will do us," muttered Yar Ali. "Here we die."

"I reckon so." Steve unscrewed the cap of his canteen. "Let's take our last drink. Anyway, we're safe from the Arabs. They'd never dare come here, with their superstitions. We'll drink and then we'll die, I reckon, but first we'll find the jewel. When I pass out, I want to have it in my hand. Maybe a few centuries later some lucky son-of-a-gun will find our skeletons—and the gem. Here's to him, whoever he is!"

With which grim jest Clarney drained his canteen and Yar Ali followed suit. They had played their last ace; the rest lay on the lap of Allah.

THEY strode up the broad way, and Yar Ali, utterly fearless in the face of human foes, glanced nervously to right and left, half expecting to see a horned and fantastic face leering at him from behind a column. Steve himself felt the somber antiquity of the place, and almost found himself fearing a rush of bronze war chariots down the forgotten streets, or to hear the sudden menacing flare of bronze trumpets. The silence in dead cities was so much more intense, he reflected, than that on the open desert.

They came to the portals of the great temple. Rows of immense columns flanked the wide doorway, which was ankle-deep in sand, and from which sagged massive bronze frameworks that had once braced mighty doors, whose polished woodwork had rotted away centuries ago. They passed into a mighty hall of misty twilight, whose shadowy stone roof was upheld by columns like the trunks of forest trees. The whole effect of the architecture was one of awesome magnitude and sullen, breath-tak-

ing splendor, like a temple built by somber giants for the abode of dark gods.

Yar Ali walked fearfully, as if he expected to awake sleeping gods, and Steve, without the Afridi's superstitions, yet felt the gloomy majesty of the place lay somber hands on his soul.

No trace of a footprint showed in the deep dust on the floor; half a century had passed since the affrighted and devil-ridden Turk had fled these silent halls. As for the Bedouins, it was easy to see why those superstitious sons of the desert shunned this haunted city—and haunted it was, not by actual ghosts, perhaps, but by the shadows of lost splendors.

As they trod the sands of the hall, which seemed endless, Steve pondered many questions: How did these fugitives from the wrath of frenzied rebels build this city? How did they pass through the country of their foes?—for Babylonia lay between Assyria and the Arabian desert. Yet there had been no other place for them to go; westward lay Syria and the sea, and north and east swarmed the "dangerous Medes", those fierce Aryans whose aid had stiffened the arm of Babylon to smite her foe to the dust.

Possibly, thought Steve, Kara-Shehr—whatever its name had been in those dim days—had been built as an outpost border city before the fall of the Assyrian empire, whither survivals of that overthrow fled. At any rate it was possible that Kara-Shehr had outlasted Nineveh by some centuries—a strange, hermit city, no doubt, cut off from the rest of the world.

Surely, as Yar Ali had said, this was once fertile country, watered by oases; and doubtless in the broken country they had passed over the night before, there had been quarries that furnished the stone for the building of the city.

Then what caused its downfall? Did the encroachment of the sands and the filling up of the springs cause the people to abandon it, or was Kara-Shehr a city of silence before the sands crept over the walls? Did the downfall come from within or without? Did civil war blot out the inhabitants, or were they slaughtered by some powerful foe from the desert? Clarney shook his head in baffled chagrin. The answers to those questions were lost in the maze of forgotten ages.

"Allaho akbar!" They had traversed the great shadowy hall and at its further end they came upon a hideous black stone altar, behind which loomed an ancient god, bestial and horrific. Steve shrugged his shoulders as he recognized the monstrous aspect of the image—aye, that was Baal, on which black altar in other ages many a screaming, writhing, naked victim had offered up its naked soul. The idol embodied in its utter, abysmal and sullen bestiality the whole soul of this demoniac city. Surely, thought Steve, the builders of Nineveh and Kara-Shehr were cast in another mold from the people of today. Their art and culture were too ponderous, too grimly barren of the lighter aspects of humanity, to be wholly human, as modern man understands humanity. Their architecture was repellent; of high skill, yet so massive, sullen and brutish in effect as to be almost beyond the comprehension of moderns.

The adventurers passed through a narrow door which opened in the end of the hall close to the idol, and came into a series of wide, dim, dusty chambers connected by column-flanked corridors. Along these they strode in the gray ghostly light, and came at last to a wide stair, whose massive stone steps led upward and vanished in the gloom. Here Yar Ali halted.

"We have dared much, *sahib,*" he muttered. "Is it wise to dare more?"

Steve, aquiver with eagerness, yet

understood the Afghan's mind. "You mean we shouldn't go up those stairs?"

"They have an evil look. To what chambers of silence and horror may they lead? When djinn haunt deserted buildings, they lurk in the upper chambers. At any moment a demon may bite off our heads."

"We're dead men anyhow," grunted Steve. "But I tell you—you go on back through the hall and watch for the Arabs while I go upstairs."

"Watch for a wind on the horizon," responded the Afghan gloomily, shifting his rifle and loosening his long knife in its scabbard. "No Bedouin comes here. Lead on, *sahib*. Thou'rt mad after the manner of all Franks, but I would not leave thee to face the djinn alone."

So the companions mounted the massive stairs, their feet sinking deep into the accumulated dust of centuries at each step. Up and up they went, to an incredible height, until the depths below merged into a vague gloom.

"We walk blind to our doom, *sahib*," muttered Yar Ali. "*Allah il allah*—and Muhammad is his Prophet! Nevertheless, I feel the presence of slumbering Evil and never again shall I hear the wind blowing up the Khyber Pass."

Steve made no reply. He did not like the breathless silence that brooded over the ancient temple, nor the grisly gray light that filtered from some hidden source.

Now above them the gloom lightened somewhat and they emerged into a vast circular chamber, grayly illumined by light that filtered in through the high, pierced ceiling. But another radiance lent itself to the illumination. A cry burst from Steve's lips, echoed by Yar Ali.

STANDING on the top step of the broad stone stair, they looked directly across the broad chamber, with its dust-covered heavy tile floor and bare black stone walls. From about the center of the chamber, massive steps led up to a stone dais, and on this dais stood a marble throne. About this throne glowed and shimmered an uncanny light, and the awe-struck adventurers gasped as they saw its source. On the throne slumped a human skeleton, an almost shapeless mass of moldering bones. A fleshless hand sagged outstretched upon the broad marble throne-arm, and in its grisly clasp there pulsed and throbbed like a living thing, a great crimson stone.

The Fire of Asshurbanipal! Even after they had found the lost city Steve had not really allowed himself to believe that they would find the gem, or that it even existed in reality. Yet he could not doubt the evidence of his eyes, dazzled by that evil, incredible glow. With a fierce shout he sprang across the chamber and up the steps. Yar Ali was at his heels, but when Steve would have seized the gem, the Afghan laid a hand on his arm.

"Wait!" exclaimed the big Muhammadan. "Touch it not yet, *sahib!* A curse lies on ancient things—and surely this is a thing triply accursed! Else why has it lain here untouched in a country of thieves for so many centuries? It is not well to disturb the possessions of the dead."

"Bosh!" snorted the American. "Superstitions! The Bedouins were scared by the tales that have come down to 'em from their ancestors. Being desert-dwellers they mistrust cities anyway, and no doubt this one had an evil reputation in its lifetime. And nobody except Bedouins have seen this place before, except that Turk, who was probably half demented with suffering.

"These bones may be those of the king mentioned in the legend—the dry desert air preserves such things indefinitely—but I doubt it. May be Assyrian—most

likely Arab—some beggar that got the gem and then died on that throne for some reason or other."

The Afghan scarcely heard him. He was gazing in fearful fascination at the great stone, as a hypnotized bird stares into a serpent's eye.

"Look at it, *sahib!*" he whispered. "What is it? No such gem as this was ever cut by mortal hands! Look how it throbs and pulses like the heart of a cobra!"

Steve was looking, and he was aware of a strange undefined feeling of uneasiness. Well versed in the knowledge of precious stones, he had never seen a stone like this. At first glance he had supposed it to be a monster ruby, as told in the legends. Now he was not sure, and he had a nervous feeling that Yar Ali was right, that this was no natural, normal gem. He could not classify the style in which it was cut, and such was the power of its lurid radiance that he found it difficult to gaze at it closely for any length of time. The whole setting was not one calculated to soothe restless nerves. The deep dust on the floor suggested an unwholesome antiquity; the gray light evoked a sense of unreality, and the heavy black walls towered grimly, hinting at hidden things.

"Let's take the stone and go!" muttered Steve, an unaccustomed panicky dread rising in his bosom.

"Wait!" Yar Ali's eyes were blazing, and he gazed, not at the gem, but at the sullen stone walls. "We are flies in the lair of the spider! *Sahib,* as Allah lives, it is more than the ghosts of old fears that lurk over this city of horror! I feel the presence of peril, as I have felt it before—as I felt it in a jungle cavern where a python lurked unseen in the darkness—as I felt it in the temple of Thuggee where the hidden stranglers of Siva crouched to spring upon us—as I feel it now, tenfold!"

Steve's hair prickled. He knew that Yar Ali was a grim veteran, not to be stampeded by silly fear or senseless panic; he well remembered the incidents referred to by the Afghan, as he remembered other occasions upon which Yar Ali's Oriental telepathic instinct had warned him of danger before that danger was seen or heard.

"What is it, Yar Ali?" he whispered.

The Afghan shook his head, his eyes filled with a weird mysterious light as he listened to the dim occult promptings of his subconsciousness.

"I know not; I know it is close to us, and that it is very ancient and very evil. I think——" Suddenly he halted and wheeled, the eery light vanishing from his eyes to be replaced by a glare of wolf-like fear and suspicion.

"Hark, *sahib!*" he snapped. "Ghosts or dead men mount the stair!"

Steve stiffened as the stealthy pad of soft sandals on stone reached his ear.

"By Judas, Ali!" he rapped; "something's out there——"

The ancient walls re-echoed to a chorus of wild yells as a horde of savage figures flooded the chamber. For one dazed insane instant Steve believed wildly that they were being attacked by re-embodied warriors of a vanished age; then the spiteful crack of a bullet past his ear and the acrid smell of powder told him that their foes were material enough. Clarney cursed; in their fancied security they had been caught like rats in a trap by the pursuing Arabs.

EVEN as the American threw up his rifle, Yar Ali fired point-blank from the hip with deadly effect, hurled his empty rifle into the horde and went down the steps like a hurricane, his three-foot Khyber knife shimmering in his hairy

hand. Into his gusto for battle went real relief that his foes were human. A bullet ripped the turban from his head, but an Arab went down with a split skull beneath the hillman's first, shearing stroke.

A tall Bedouin clapped his gun-muzzle to the Afghan's side, but before he could pull the trigger, Clarney's bullet scattered his brains. The very number of the attackers hindered their onslaught on the big Afridi, whose tigerish quickness made shooting as dangerous to themselves as to him. The bulk of them swarmed about him, striking with simitar and rifle-stock while others charged up the steps after Steve. At that range there was no missing; the American simply thrust his rifle muzzle into a bearded face and blasted it into a ghastly ruin. The others came on, screaming like panthers.

And now as he prepared to expend his last cartridge, Clarney saw two things in one flashing instant—a wild warrior who, with froth on his beard and a heavy simitar uplifted, was almost upon him, and another who knelt on the floor drawing a careful bead on the plunging Yar Ali. Steve made an instant choice and fired over the shoulder of the charging swordsman, killing the rifleman—and voluntarily offering his own life for his friend's; for the simitar was swinging at his own head. But even as the Arab swung, grunting with the force of the blow, his sandaled foot slipped on the marble steps and the curved blade, veering erratically from its arc, clashed on Steve's rifle-barrel. In an instant the American clubbed his rifle, and as the Bedouin recovered his balance and again heaved up the simitar, Clarney struck with all his rangy power, and stock and skull shattered together.

Then a heavy ball smacked into his shoulder, sickening him with the shock.

As he staggered dizzily, a Bedouin whipped a turban-cloth about his feet and jerked viciously. Clarney pitched headlong down the steps, to strike with stunning force. A gun-stock in a brown hand went up to dash out his brains, but an imperious command halted the blow.

"Slay him not, but bind him hand and foot."

As Steve struggled dazedly against many gripping hands, it seemed to him that somewhere he had heard that imperious voice before.

The American's downfall had occurred in a matter of seconds. Even as Steve's second shot had cracked, Yar Ali had half severed a raider's arm and himself received a numbing blow from a rifle-stock on his left shoulder. His sheepskin coat, worn despite the desert heat, saved his hide from half a dozen slashing knives. A rifle was discharged so close to his face that the powder burnt him fiercely, bringing a bloodthirsty yell from the maddened Afghan. As Yar Ali swung up his dripping blade the rifleman, ashy-faced, lifted his rifle above his head in both hands to parry the downward blow, whereat the Afridi, with a yelp of ferocious exultation, shifted as a jungle-cat strikes and plunged his long knife into the Arab's belly. But at that instant a rifle-stock, swung with all the hearty ill-will its wielder could evoke, crashed against the giant's head, laying open the scalp and dashing him to his knees.

With the dogged and silent ferocity of his breed, Yar Ali staggered blindly up again, slashing at foes he could scarcely see, but a storm of blows battered him down again, nor did his attackers cease beating him until he lay still. They would have finished him in short order then, but for another peremptory order from their chief; whereupon they bound the senseless knife-man and flung him

down alongside Steve, who was fully conscious and aware of the savage hurt of the bullet in his shoulder.

He glared up at the tall Arab who stood looking down at him.

"Well, *sahib,*" said this one—and Steve saw he was no Bedouin—"do you not remember me?"

Steve scowled; a bullet-wound is no aid to concentration.

"You look familiar—by Judas!—you are! Nureddin El Mekru!"

"I am honored! The *sahib* remembers!" Nureddin salaamed mockingly. "And you remember, no doubt, the occasion on which you made me a present of —this?"

The dark eyes shadowed with bitter menace and the shaykh indicated a thin white scar on the angle of his jaw.

"I remember," snarled Clarney, whom pain and anger did not tend to make docile. "It was in Somaliland, years ago. You were in the slave-trade then. A wretch of a nigger escaped from you and took refuge with me. You walked into my camp one night in your high-handed way, started a row and in the ensuing scrap you got a butcher-knife across your face. I wish I'd cut your lousy throat."

"You had your chance," answered the Arab. "Now the tables are turned."

"I thought your stamping-ground lay west," growled Clarney; "Yemen and the Somali country."

"I quit the slave-trade long ago," answered the shaykh. "It is an outworn game. I led a band of thieves in Yemen for a time; then again I was forced to change my location. I came here with a few faithful followers, and by Allah, those wild men nearly slit my throat at first. But I overcame their suspicions, and now I lead more men than have followed me in years.

"They whom you fought off yesterday were my men—scouts I had sent out ahead. My oasis lies far to the west. We have ridden for many days, for I was on my way to this very city. When my scouts rode in and told me of two wanderers, I did not alter my course, for I had business first in Beled-el-Djinn. We rode into the city from the west and saw your tracks in the sand. We followed them, and you were blind buffalo who heard not our coming."

Steve snarled. "You wouldn't have caught us so easy, only we thought no Bedouin would dare come into Kara-Shehr."

Nureddin nodded. "But I am no Bedouin. I have traveled far and seen many lands and many races, and I have read many books. I know that fear is smoke, that the dead are dead, and that djinn and ghosts and curses are mists that the wind blows away. It was because of the tales of the red stone that I came into this forsaken desert. But it has taken months to persuade my men to ride with me here.

"But—I am here! And your presence is a delightful surprize. Doubtless you have guessed why I had you taken alive; I have more elaborate entertainment planned for you and that Pathan swine. Now—I take the Fire of Asshurbanipal and we will go."

He turned toward the dais, and one of his men, a bearded one-eyed giant, exclaimed, "Hold, my lord! Ancient evil reigned here before the days of Muhammad! The djinn howl through these halls when the winds blow, and men have seen ghosts dancing on the walls beneath the moon. No man of mortals has dared this black city for a thousand years —save one, half a century ago, who fled shrieking.

"You have come here from Yemen; you do not know the ancient curse on this foul city, and this evil stone, which pulses

like the red heart of Satan! We have followed you here against our judgment, because you have proven yourself a strong man, and have said you hold a charm against all evil beings. You said you but wished to look on this mysterious gem, but now we see it is your intention to take it for yourself. Do not offend the djinn!"

"Nay, Nureddin, do not offend the djinn!" chorused the other Bedouins. The shaykh's own hard-bitten ruffians, standing in a compact group somewhat apart from the Bedouins, said nothing; hardened to crimes and deeds of impiety, they were less affected by the superstitions of the desert men, to whom the dread tale of the accursed city had been repeated for centuries. Steve, even while hating Nureddin with concentrated venom, realized the magnetic power of the man, the innate leadership that had enabled him to overcome thus far the fears and traditions of ages.

"The curse is laid on infidels who invade the city," answered Nureddin, "not on the Faithful. See, in this chamber have we overcome our *kafar* foes!"

A white-bearded desert hawk shook his head.

"The curse is more ancient than Muhammad, and recks not of race or creed. Evil men reared this black city in the dawn of the Beginnings of Days. They oppressed our ancestors of the black tents, and warred among themselves; aye, the black walls of this foul city were stained with blood, and echoed to the shouts of unholy revel and the whispers of dark intrigues.

"Thus came the stone to the city: there dwelt a magician at the court of Asshurbanipal, and the black wisdom of ages was not denied to him. To gain honor and power for himself, he dared the horrors of a nameless vast cavern in a dark, untraveled land, and from those fiend-haunted depths he brought that blazing gem, which is carved of the frozen flames of Hell! By reason of his fearful power in black magic, he put a spell on the demon which guarded the ancient gem, and so stole away the stone. And the demon slept in the cavern unknowing.

"So this magician—Xuthltan by name—dwelt in the court of the sultan Asshurbanipal and did magic and forecast events by scanning the lurid deeps of the stone, into which no eyes but his could look unblinded. And men called the stone the Fire of Asshurbanipal, in honor of the king.

"But evil came upon the kingdom and men cried out that it was the curse of the djinn, and the sultan in great fear bade Xuthltan take the gem and cast it into the cavern from which he had taken it, lest worse ill befall them.

"Yet it was not the magician's will to give up the gem wherein he read strange secrets of pre-Adamite days, and he fled to the rebel city of Kara-Shehr, where soon civil war broke out and men strove with one another to possess the gem. Then the king who ruled the city, coveting the stone, seized the magician and put him to death by torture, and in this very room he watched him die; with the gem in his hand the king sat upon the throne—even as he has sat throughout the centuries—even as now he sits!"

The Arab's finger stabbed at the moldering bones on the marble throne, and the wild desert men blenched; even Nureddin's own scoundrels recoiled, catching their breath, but the shaykh showed no sign of perturbation.

"As Xuthltan died," continued the old Bedouin, "he cursed the stone whose magic had not saved him, and he shrieked aloud the fearful words which undid the spell he had put upon the demon in the cavern, and set the monster free. And crying out on the forgotten gods, Cthul-

hu and Koth and Yog-Sothoth, and all the pre-Adamite Dwellers in the black cities under the sea and the caverns of the earth, he called upon them to take back that which was theirs, and with his dying breath pronounced doom on the false king, and that doom was that the king should sit on his throne holding in his hand the Fire of Asshurbanipal until the thunder of Judgment Day.

"Thereat the great stone cried out as a live thing cries, and the king and his soldiers saw a black cloud spinning up from the floor, and out of the cloud blew a fetid wind, and out of the wind came a grisly shape which stretched forth fearsome paws and laid them on the king, who shriveled and died at their touch. And the soldiers fled screaming, and all the people of the city ran forth wailing into the desert, where they perished or gained through the wastes to the far oasis towns. Kara-Shehr lay silent and deserted, the haunt of the lizard and the jackal. And when some of the desert-people ventured into the city they found the king dead on his throne, clutching the blazing gem, but they dared not lay hand upon it, for they knew the demon lurked near to guard it through all the ages—as he lurks near even as we stand here."

The warriors shuddered involuntarily and glanced about, and Nureddin said, "Why did he not come forth when the Franks entered the chamber? Is he deaf, that the sound of the combat has not awakened him?"

"We have not touched the gem," answered the old Bedouin, "nor had the Franks molested it. Men have looked on it and lived; but no mortal may touch it and survive."

NUREDDIN started to speak, gazed at the stubborn, uneasy faces and realized the futility of argument. His attitude changed abruptly.

"I am master here," he snapped, dropping a hand to his holster. "I have not sweat and bled for this gem to be balked at the last by groundless fears! Stand back, all! Let any man cross me at the peril of his head!"

He faced them, his eyes blazing, and they fell back, cowed by the force of his ruthless personality. He strode boldly up the marble steps, and the Arabs caught their breath, recoiling toward the door; Yar Ali, conscious at last, groaned dismally. God! thought Steve, what a barbaric scene!—bound captives on the dust-heaped floor, wild warriors clustered about, gripping their weapons, the raw acrid scent of blood and burnt powder still fouling the air, corpses strewn in a horrid welter of blood, brains and entrails—and on the dais, the hawk-faced shaykh, oblivious to all except the evil crimson glow in the skeleton fingers that rested on the marble throne.

A tense silence gripped all as Nureddin stretched forth his hand slowly, as if hypnotized by the throbbing crimson light. And in Steve's subconsciousness there shuddered a dim echo, as of something vast and loathsome waking suddenly from an age-long slumber. The American's eyes moved instinctively toward the grim cyclopean walls. The jewel's glow had altered strangely; it burned a deeper, darker red, angry and menacing.

"Heart of all evil," murmured the shaykh, "how many princes died for thee in the Beginnings of Happenings? Surely the blood of kings throbs in thee. The sultans and the princesses and the generals who wore thee, they are dust and are forgotten, but thou blazest with majesty undimmed, fire of the world——"

Nureddin seized the stone. A shuddery wail broke from the Arabs, cut through by a sharp inhuman cry. To Steve it seemed, horribly, that the great jewel

had cried out like a living thing! The stone slipped from the shaykh's hand. Nureddin might have dropped it; to Steve it looked as though it leaped convulsively, as a live thing might leap. It rolled from the dais, bounding from step to step, with Nureddin springing after it, cursing as his clutching hand missed it. It struck the floor, veered sharply, and despite the deep dust, rolled like a revolving ball of fire toward the back wall. Nureddin was close upon it—it struck the wall—the shaykh's hand reached for it.

A scream of mortal fear ripped the tense silence. Without warning the solid wall had opened. Out of the black wall that gaped there, a tentacle shot and gripped the shaykh's body as a python girdles its victim, and jerked him headlong into the darkness. And then the wall showed blank and solid once more; only from within sounded a hideous, high-pitched, muffled screaming that chilled the blood of the listeners. Howling wordlessly, the Arabs stampeded, jammed in a battling, screeching mass in the doorway, tore through and raced madly down the wide stairs.

Steve and Yar Ali, lying helplessly, heard the frenzied clamor of their flight fade away into the distance, and gazed in dumb horror at the grim wall. The shrieks had faded into a more horrific silence. Holding their breath, they heard suddenly a sound that froze the blood in their veins—the soft sliding of metal or stone in a groove. At the same time the hidden door began to open, and Steve caught a glimmer in the blackness that might have been the glitter of monstrous eyes. He closed his own eyes; he dared not look upon whatever horror slunk from that hideous black well. He knew that there are strains the human brain cannot stand, and every primitive instinct in his soul cried out to him that this thing was nightmare and lunacy. He sensed that Yar Ali likewise closed his eyes, and the two lay like dead men.

CLARNEY heard no sound, but he sensed the presence of a horrific evil too grisly for human comprehension—of an Invader from Outer Gulfs and far black reaches of cosmic being. A deadly cold pervaded the chamber, and Steve felt the glare of inhuman eyes sear through his closed lids and freeze his consciousness. If he looked, if he opened his eyes, he knew stark black madness would be his instant lot.

He felt a soul-shakingly foul breath against his face and knew that the monster was bending close above him, but he lay like a man frozen in a nightmare. He clung to one thought: neither he nor Yar Ali had touched the jewel this horror guarded.

Then he no longer smelled the foul odor, the coldness in the air grew appreciably less, and he heard again the secret door slide in its groove. The fiend was returning to its hiding-place. Not all the legions of Hell could have prevented Steve's eyes from opening a trifle. He had only a glimpse as the hidden door slid to—and that one glimpse was enough to drive all consciousness from his brain. Steve Clarney, iron-nerved adventurer, fainted for the only time in his checkered life.

How long he lay there Steve never knew, but it could not have been long, for he was roused by Yar Ali's whisper, "Lie still, *sahib,* a little shifting of my body and I can reach thy cords with my teeth."

Steve felt the Afghan's powerful teeth at work on his bonds, and as he lay with his face jammed into the thick dust, and his wounded shoulder began to throb agonizingly—he had forgotten it until now—he began to gather the wandering

threads of his consciousness, and it all came back to him. How much, he wondered dazedly, had been the nightmares of delirium, born from suffering and the thirst that caked his throat? The fight with the Arabs had been real—the bonds and the wounds showed that—but the grisly doom of the shaykh—the thing that had crept out of the black entrance in the wall—surely that had been a figment of delirium. Nureddin had fallen into a well or pit of some sort—Steve felt his hands were free and he rose to a sitting posture, fumbling for a pocket-knife the Arabs had overlooked. He did not look up or about the chamber as he slashed the cords that bound his ankles, and then freed Yar Ali, working awkwardly because his left arm was stiff and useless.

"Where are the Bedouins?" he asked, as the Afghan rose, lifting him to his feet.

"Allah, *sahib,*" whispered Yar Ali, "are you mad? Have you forgotten? Let us go quickly before the djinn returns!"

"It was a nightmare," muttered Steve. "Look — the jewel is back on the throne——" His voice died out. Again that red glow throbbed about the ancient throne, reflecting from the moldering skull; again in the outstretched finger-bones pulsed the Fire of Asshurbanipal. But at the foot of the throne lay another object that had not been there before—the severed head of Nureddin el Mekru stared sightlessly up at the gray light filtering through the stone ceiling. The bloodless lips were drawn back from the teeth in a ghastly grin, the staring eyes mirrored an intolerable horror. In the thick dust of the floor three spoors showed—one of the shaykh's where he had followed the red jewel as it rolled to the wall, and above it two other sets of tracks, coming to the throne and returning to the wall—vast, shapeless tracks, as of splayed feet, taloned and gigantic, neither human nor animal.

"My God!" choked Steve. "It was true—and the Thing—the Thing I saw——"

STEVE remembered the flight from that chamber as a rushing nightmare, in which he and his companion hurtled headlong down an endless stair that was a gray well of fear, raced blindly through dusty silent chambers, past the glowering idol in the mighty hall and into the blazing light of the desert sun, where they fell slavering, fighting for breath.

Again Steve was roused by the Afridi's voice: "*Sahib, sahib,* in the Name of Allah the Compassionate, our luck has turned!"

Steve looked at his companion as a man might look in a trance. The big Afghan's garments were in tatters, and blood-soaked. He was stained with dust and caked with blood, and his voice was a croak. But his eyes were alight with hope and he pointed with a trembling finger.

"In the shade of yon ruined wall!" he croaked, striving to moisten his blackened lips. "*Allah il allah!* The horses of the men we killed! With canteens and food-pouches at the saddle-horns! Those dogs fled without halting for the steeds of their comrades!"

New life surged up into Steve's bosom and he rose, staggering.

"Out of here," he mumbled. "Out of here, quick!"

Like dying men they stumbled to the horses, tore them loose and climbed fumblingly into the saddles.

"We'll lead the spare mounts," croaked Steve, and Yar Ali nodded emphatic agreement.

"Belike we shall need them ere we sight the coast."

Though their tortured nerves screamed

for the water that swung in canteens at the saddle-horns, they turned the mounts aside and, swaying in the saddle, rode like flying corpses down the long sandy street of Kara-Shehr, between the ruined palaces and the crumbling columns, crossed the fallen wall and swept out into the desert. Not once did either glance back toward that black pile of ancient horror, nor did either speak until the ruins faded into the hazy distance. Then and only then did they draw rein and ease their thirst.

"Allah il allah!" said Yar Ali piously. "Those dogs have beaten me until it is as though every bone in my body were broken. Dismount, I beg thee, *sahib,* and let me probe for that accursed bullet, and dress thy shoulder to the best of my meager ability."

While this was going on, Yar Ali spoke, avoiding his friend's eye, "You said, *sahib,* you said something about—about seeing? What saw ye, in Allah's name?"

A strong shudder shook the American's steely frame.

"You didn't look when—when the—the Thing put back the jewel in the skeleton's hand and left Nureddin's head on the dais?"

"By Allah, not I!" swore Yar Ali. "My eyes were as closed as if they had been welded together by the molten irons of Satan!"

Steve made no reply until the comrades had once more swung into the saddle and started on their long trek for the coast, which, with spare horses, food, water and weapons, they had a good chance to reach.

"I looked," the American said somberly. "I wish I had not; I know I'll dream about it for the rest of my life. I had only a glance; I couldn't describe it as a man describes an earthly thing. God help me, it wasn't earthly or sane either. Mankind isn't the first owner of the earth; there were Beings here before his coming—and now, survivals of hideously ancient epochs. Maybe spheres of alien dimensions press unseen on this material universe today. Sorcerers have called up sleeping devils before now and controlled them with magic. It is not unreasonable to suppose an Assyrian magician could invoke an elemental demon out of the earth to avenge him and guard something that must have come out of Hell in the first place.

"I'll try to tell you what I glimpsed; then we'll never speak of it again. It was gigantic and black and shadowy; it was a hulking monstrosity that walked upright like a man, but it was like a toad, too, and it was winged and tentacled. I saw only its back; if I'd seen the front of it—its face—I'd have undoubtedly lost my mind. The old Arab was right; God help us, it was the monster that Xuthltan called up out of the dark blind caverns of the earth to guard the Fire of Asshurbanipal!"

Out of the Sun

By GRANVILLE S. HOSS

Is there life in the swirling heat of the sun? This is the story of a scientist who determined to find out

I PROPOSE to make public the most remarkable series of letters it has ever been my fortune to peruse. I can hardly expect them to be received without skepticism and in some quarters positive unbelief and even ridicule. It would be strange indeed should they meet with any other reception, as the incidents dealt with are so astounding and bizarre that I doubt even the boldest of our writers of fiction would have the temerity to use them in a tale of the imagination.

In spite of what I have just said, I ask that the letters be read with full belief, or at least with an open mind. I vouch for the truth of every word they contain. I knew the writer well and intimately for more than thirty years. He was never a man to juggle the truth and could have had no motive for such a course. And finally I journeyed to the scene of the tragedy and viewed the bodies. Thus I was able personally to verify many of the facts given in the letters.

I have arranged the letters according to date and added, as a sort of post scriptum, an extract from the weekly paper published at Mountain Top, Wyoming, where the events occurred. But first I had better state how the letters came to be written.

Christmas Eve, 1928, in Chicago was bitter cold. The city lay frozen under a heavy covering of snow and ice. This will explain why Baxter Bliss and I were loth to leave the genial warmth of the Michigan Boulevard restaurant where we had finished a late supper and sat idly over our coffee and cigars, gazing at the hurrying stream of late Christmas shoppers and the heavy traffic of the wide boulevard. Our silence was suddenly ended by Bliss noisily exhaling a great cloud of smoke and exclaiming, "I wonder if all the planets and stars suffer the extreme climatic changes and differences we find here."

"I suppose they do," I replied without much interest, "unless some are supplied with several suns to maintain an even temperature over their whole surface."

"That might be," he agreed. "Some very likely enjoy a very hot climate, hotter than anything we know here, while others are perpetually cold. It would be interesting to note the variations of life on those distant balls, caused by the differing climatic and atmospheric conditions."

"But they are not all inhabited," I objected. "We at least know that some of them can not support life."

"We know nothing of the sort," Bliss retorted. "Had you never seen any of the myriad forms of life inhabiting our oceans, streams and puddles, you would say, basing your judgment on what is necessary to sustain your own life, that nothing could live under water, would you not?"

"I suppose so," I admittted.

"And you would be wrong, for life is found not only in the frozen Arctic seas, but even in the boiling springs of the West. I maintain that it is not only possible, but extremely probable, that the

moon and all the rest of the planets are teeming with life."

"Well," I laughed, "have it your own way. But I know of one place where there is surely no life. The sun."

"Don't be too sure of that," he retorted. "Lately I have considered it altogether probable that there is life on the sun."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "The Christmas spirit or what goes with it seems to have gone to your head and disturbed your imagination."

"Oh, laugh on!" he cried half angrily. "Did you ever hear of a photon? No, of course not. Bah! What is the use of argument? Come, it grows late and I must go."

By the time we struggled into our heavy wraps and stepped out into the cold December night, Bliss had regained his usual good temper. We parted at State and Madison Streets with a hearty handshake and Merry Christmas. His last words as he turned to board a north-bound bus were, "I'll prove my contention some day."

I never saw him again alive. He dis-

"The sun, peopled by beings like her, must be a lovely place."

appeared from Chicago and it was three years before I heard from him or knew where he had gone. In October, 1931, a letter dated from Mountain Top, Wyoming, explained his absence and stay in that distant place. This letter and those which followed can now speak for themselves, or rather for my friend who is gone. Let him tell his story in his own words.

Mountain Top, Wyoming,
October 14, 1931.

MY DEAR G———

Who would ever have thought of me living contented in an out-of-the-way place like this? A few years ago I would have laughed to scorn the mere suggestion of such an existence. But here I am.

A short time after last seeing you, I was notified by an attorney here that I had inherited, through the death of a distant relative, a house and small tract of ground at this place. I did not need the property and did not want it, but having nothing better to do at the time, decided to go out and have a look at it. I liked all I found so well that I decided to stay, for a time at least. So I refurnished the house, made some needed repairs and alterations and am likely to be right here for the rest of my days.

Do not get the idea that this place is perched on a high mountain top. The town is built on a hill or sort of plateau, but there are high mountains all around it. My place is a mile from town, overlooking the hillside sloping to the valley below and commanding an unobstructed view of the mountains in the near distance. An altogether delightful place.

When you write, remember I have been out of touch with everything happening in my old home. The only paper I ever see is the weekly published here.

Overlook and pardon my long silence. Prove your good nature by letting me have a prompt reply with a resumé of all that has taken place there in our sphere since I left.

As ever yours,
BLISS.

November 21, 1931.

MY DEAR G———

Thanks for your long and interesting letter. Am happy to hear of Mary's good fortune. She deserves it. Give her my affectionate regard and best wishes. It is too bad about Charley. Wish I could be of some use to him.

Oh, by the way, do you remember our last conversation, on Christmas Eve 1928? I have thought of it many times since and am more than ever convinced of the possibility of life existing on the sun, and am going to prove that it does. In my next letter I may be able to tell you something definite of my plans. They are still quite hazy, but taking form. I can see now it will be a big undertaking and a costly one.

Write me often. Your letters seem like a voice from another world.

As ever yours,
BLISS.

December 24, 1931.

DEAR G———

Glad to have your letter and the information it contains. You give me surprizing intelligence of John Fortune. Who would have dreamed of him doing such a wild thing?

This is the third anniversary of our last meeting in Chicago and my plans for ascertaining if life exists on the sun are progressing. I have placed an order for a portion of my equipment with a distant steel foundry and when that part is received, will immediately engage workmen to set it up and construct the remainder of what I need.

To prove the existence of life on the sun does not seem to me such an impossible task as on first thought it would appear. Science has found that what we call sunlight is in reality small particles of the mass of that body, millions of tons of which are thrown off into space every second. The particles have been named photons.

Now why is it not likely, that among the countless billions of infinitesimal parts of the sun's mass reaching the earth each day there is dormant life? And why can it not be caught under such conditions that it will incubate? As I see it, the great difficulty will be to produce and maintain sufficient heat for the purpose. At any rate, this is my problem and the manner in which I am setting about to solve it. What think you of my chance of success?

As ever,

BLISS.

March 2, 1932.

DEAR G———

Your last received a month ago and of course you would throw cold water. But just wait. Maybe time will show I am not quite so mad as you seem to think.

I am about ready for the test. I have had constructed a steel room with walls, ceiling and floor four feet thick. Around this is six feet of solid concrete work. An opening is left in the top to catch the sunlight and of course there is a door in one side which can be closed. As I told you before, I think my big problem will be heat, but feel that I have mastered it. I will soon know, as all will be completed within the next two weeks.

Even though you do not believe in what I am attempting, you can at least wish me luck.

As ever,

BLISS.

April 3, 1932.

DEAR G———

The experiment is progressing. I have succeeded in producing an incredible heat. But is it enough? There is no sign of life in the steel room, which is a solid mass of fire. The skies have been clear, permitting a constant flow of sunlight into the fiery room. I could not have asked for more ideal conditions.

Your last letter was full of interest, but I am so filled with the great experiment I can not take time to comment on what you tell me.

As ever,

BLISS.

June 15, 1932.

MY DEAR G———

Just a line to let you know I think I have succeeded. There is certainly something in the steel room which was not there when the fire was started. There are half a dozen lumps on the floor, but they are too small and unformed for me to distinguish through the flames what they are. But they move about. Do you get that? They move and change position.

More next time.

As ever,

BLISS.

August 1, 1932.

DEAR G———

For the past six weeks I have suffered alternate fits of hope and despair, but now I know. There is life in the fiery room: six creatures, one of which has grown much faster than the others and is developing arms and legs and a head, though all members are too rudimentary for me to guess what the creature will be like if it lives and continues to grow. Another has a long neck and head and the body is elongating from its hitherto spherical shape. The rest re-

semble nothing but lumps continually moving about.

Congratulate me, my dear friend, for I have succeeded.

The experiment has been extravagantly costly, but I have plenty and can think of no better way to spend it.

Don't think because I do not answer your letters in formal manner and with any great regularity, that I am not glad to have them. I appreciate every one and wish you would write oftener.

As ever,

BLISS.

September 4, 1932.

MY DEAR G———

Bad fortune. Only one of my sun creatures is left. The rest have died and been reduced to nothing by the fires.

I hesitate to say so, but the survivor seems to be taking on a definite human form. It is about the size of the penny dolls children used to buy in our young days. It grows stronger and moves about over greater areas of the room each week. I have high hopes that it will not share the fate of the others, but will grow to maturity. Think what it will mean to scientific knowledge. How the savants will gasp when I invite them to Mountain Top to view an inhabitant of the sun!

Yes, you might send me the book you mention, though I will not promise to read it very soon, as my own days are more exciting right now than any fiction which can be imagined by the romanticists.

Thanks, and believe me, I appreciate your thoughtfulness.

As ever,

BLISS.

December 1, 1932.

DEAR G———

Let me hasten to assure you that I am well and that your several letters during the past three months have reached me in due course. My neglect in answering is due to my having become a man with only one interest in life.

The sun creature has grown into a fully developed woman about eighteen inches high. She has flaming red hair, is slim and perfectly proportioned with a fairy-like beauty which grows more radiant with her increasing stature. Such perfect beauty was never before seen in this world.

I feel rather queer and sick when I look at her living and moving about comfortably in that fiery inferno. I have to remind myself she is in her natural element and just as much at home as I am in the outer air.

Of course I am unable to give her food, as anything I could offer her would be consumed by the flames in a few seconds. She does not seem to want for anything, but appears perfectly content and happy reclining upon the white-hot steel floor in her room of fire.

Do not be alarmed at my failure to write with any regularity. Why can you not come out here and see for yourself the wonder I have been writing of?

As ever,

BLISS.

March 8, 1933.

DEAR G———

Instead of sitting in Chicago and writing letters full of questions and excuses, why don't you come on out here and observe at first hand what I can make you only dimly comprehend by writing?

The Sun Maiden has now attained a height of about three feet. Her beauty

increases each day. She is of a superlative loveliness impossible to portray adequately in words. Hers is an unearthly beauty such as we have all tried to imagine in the angels.

When I open the door of her fiery home, she smiles and holds out her hand in greeting, but needless to say, I do not attempt to grasp it. At first she resented my aloofness. Her eyes would flash angrily and her body glow like molten gold. Her anger was always of short duration and she would soon be smiling again, her body its normal pink color.

How has she managed to thrive and grow without food in that fiery furnace? I think I have found the answer. She draws sustenance from the sunlight. While the sunlight pours into her room, she is bright and active, tripping about and dancing much in the manner of a ballet girl. After sunset she droops, and on dark days lies on the floor with her head pillowed on her arm like one completely weary and worn out. Then when the sun breaks through the clouds what a change takes place! She sits up and smiles and is soon on her feet capering about the room.

As ever,

BLISS.

May 15, 1933.

DEAR G———

As usual, more excuses in your last letter. Well, if you do not think the Sun Maiden is worth the paltry expense and time you would lose from your business, then stay where you are.

She is now all of four feet tall and I am sure fully grown. I did not think it possible, but she has become more and more beautiful with each passing day. I have not words to convey to you the haunting, ethereal quality of her beauty. It follows me waking or sleeping.

I spent most of yesterday examining the apparatus which furnishes heat for her room. I shiver when I think of the possibility of it failing or getting out of order. A disaster of that sort would mean her death. And the death of the Sun Maiden would be the end for me. Yes, I mean it. Separated as we are by a raging fire which she can not leave and I can not enter, she has come to mean more to me than all the rest of the world. If you could see her I think you could understand.

The sun, peopled with beings like her, must be a lovely place. I wish she could speak and tell me of conditions there. But what nonsense! She can have no more knowledge of her home there than I have, for she was born right here on earth in the fiery room she now occupies.

As ever,

BLISS.

July 1, 1933.

MY DEAR G———

I think the Sun Maiden's method of communication is purely mental. At least, she has never made a sound, and two weeks ago as I was observing her through the doorway, she stood perfectly stationary and gazed hard into my eyes as though attempting to convey a message, but it would not register on my earthly brain. She seemed to realize this, for her efforts ceased, and smiling sadly she shook her head several times as though to imply that it was of no use.

The possibility of my fires failing worries me incessantly. Should this happen, the Sun Maiden would die as painful a death as you or I, should we be consumed by fire. I had proof of this just yesterday. When I approached the doorway of her dwelling, she stepped forward smiling with outstretched hands inviting me to enter, and as I came nearer, darted forward as if to seize and drag me inside. As one of her hands was

thrust outside the flames into the short passage leading from her door to the outer air, she stopped abruptly with an expression of intense pain on her face as she withdrew her hand into the flames again. She examined her hand and gazed at me so reproachfully that I caught myself in the very act of rushing in to console her.

As ever,

BLISS.

July 17, 1933.

DEAR G———

I am in despair. How am I to guard against a breakdown in my heating apparatus? Only yesterday I found a defect just in time to repair it and avert disaster. Such a calamity will result in the death of my poor Sun Maiden. And how can I go on living without her? I just will not do it. I suppose you will at once decide I am crazy, but you will be wrong. How can I expect you to understand my feelings? You have not seen her as I have, grow and develop from a formless lump into the radiant and happy creature she now is.

I go carefully over every part of my heating machinery a dozen times during the day and night. The rest of my time, all I can spare from sleep, is spent in contemplation of the Sun Maiden. She always greets me with a smile, holding out her pretty little hands in welcome. She then dances gleefully about her room, while the billowing flames toss her long hair about like a strong wind. A sight so entrancing was never before seen by mortal man. I just can not lose her. I can not.

Yours,

BLISS.

November 15, 1933.

DEAR G———

I am a wreck. You would not recognize me. Through incessant watching I have managed to keep the fires going in the Sun Maiden's room without a break. But now a new danger threatens her. The intense and unbroken heat I have been compelled to maintain in her room has caused the steel walls to crumble in spots, and these rotten areas are accumulating and growing in size each week. The six-foot thickness of concrete covering the steel room shows a number of cracks. These disasters can only mean that the end is not far off. Oh, why did I bring this radiant creature to life only to have her meet a miserable death in a few months? But no, I will not despair. I can not despair. I will save her.

Yours,

BLISS.

Extract from the Mountain Top Herald of December 15, 1933:

SHOCKING TRAGEDY DISCOVERED LAST MONDAY

The dead bodies of Barton Bliss and a nude woman were found in the grounds of his home west of town last Monday morning. Mr. Bliss had been terribly burned. There were no marks of any kind on the body of the woman, leaving the cause of her death a complete mystery.

The bodies were discovered by Asa Giles, who stopped at the house for water while on his way to Mountain Top. They were lying just outside a great square structure of cement and steel. The interior of the building showed signs of an intense heat having been maintained there over a long period but for what purpose is unknown.

On making his gruesome discovery, Mr. Giles hurried on to town, where he notified Joe Mills, our chief of police, who called the coroner and then hurried to the Bliss place.

Dr. Baymore at once pronounced the terrible burns to be the cause of the death of Mr. Bliss but would not commit himself in the case of the woman. While hazarding no opinion as to the cause of her death or when it occurred, he be-

lieves her body must have undergone some sort of mummifying process. Pink in color, her flesh was soft but solid, reacting to the touch not unlike rubber. Her hair, of a flaming red color, was of a different texture from any found on a human head. The body, perfect in its symmetry and beauty and showing not a mark of any sort, weighed only one and one-half pounds. Dr. Baymore states emphatically that he knows of no method of embalming which could produce these conditions and frankly admits he is completely puzzled.

Mr. Bliss was more or less of a recluse, having no intimate friends here and very few acquaintances, which will explain why the tragedy was not discovered for several days after its occurrence. A search of his house disclosed very little information, as all correspondence and even bills and business letters seem to have been destroyed by him. One letter was finally unearthed in the back of a bureau drawer. This was more than a year old and written by a Mr. G. S. Hall of Chicago, who has been notified by wire and who has signified his intention of coming at once.

Vespers

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

Slowly we circle the prison yard,
  Dull-eyed men whom the world has broken;
Our bones are weary, the stones are hard;
  There is no laughter, no word is spoken.

Shuffling feet and the ghosts of sighing,
  As the guards stare down from the high gray walls;
The heavens are flames, for the sun is dying,
  And hark, through the stillness a robin calls!

There comes the stroke of a tyrant bell—
  Dull-eyed men and a robin calling!
Shuffle of feet to each iron-walled cell,
  Clods of clay on the steel cots falling.

Smothered curses and bitter weeping,
  But in the shadows a dream has stirred;
Over my cell floor the rats go creeping,
  But my child-like heart is the singing bird.

The Haunter of the Dark

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

A powerful story about an old church in Providence, Rhode Island, that was shunned and feared by all who knew it

(Dedicated to Robert Bloch)

I have seen the dark universe yawning
  Where the black planets roll without aim—
Where they roll in their horror unheeded,
  Without knowledge or luster or name.
—*Nemesis.*

CAUTIOUS investigators will hesitate to challenge the common belief that Robert Blake was killed by lightning, or by some profound nervous shock derived from an electrical discharge. It is true that the window he faced was unbroken, but nature has shown herself capable of many freakish performances. The expression on his face may easily have arisen from some obscure muscular source unrelated to anything he saw, while the entries in his diary are clearly the result of a fantastic imagination aroused by certain local superstitions and by certain old matters he had uncovered. As for the anomalous conditions at the deserted church on Federal Hill—the shrewd analyst is not slow in attributing them to some charlatanry, conscious or unconscious, with at least some of which Blake was secretly connected.

For after all, the victim was a writer and painter wholly devoted to the field of myth, dream, terror, and superstition, and avid in his quest for scenes and effects of a bizarre, spectral sort. His earlier stay in the city—a visit to a strange old man as deeply given to occult and forbidden lore as he—had ended amidst death and flame, and it must have been some morbid instinct which drew him back from his home in Milwaukee. He may have known of the old stories despite his statements to the contrary in the diary, and his death may have nipped in the bud some stupendous hoax destined to have a literary reflection.

Among those, however, who have examined and correlated all this evidence, there remain several who cling to less rational and commonplace theories. They are inclined to take much of Blake's diary at its face value, and point significantly to certain facts such as the undoubted genuineness of the old church record, the verified existence of the disliked and unorthodox Starry Wisdom sect prior to 1877, the recorded disappearance of an inquisitive reporter named Edwin M. Lillibridge in 1893, and—above all—the look of monstrous, transfiguring fear on the face of the young writer when he died. It was one of these believers who, moved to fanatical extremes, threw into the bay the curiously angled stone and its strangely adorned metal box found in the old church steeple—the black windowless steeple, and not the tower where Blake's diary said those things originally were. Though widely censured both officially and unofficially, this man—a reputable physician with a taste for odd folklore—averred that he had rid the earth of something too dangerous to rest upon it.

Between these two schools of opinion the reader must judge for himself. The papers have given the tangible details from a skeptical angle, leaving for others the drawing of the picture as Robert Blake saw it—or thought he saw it—or pretended to see it. Now, studying the

diary closely, dispassionately, and at leisure, let us summarize the dark chain of events from the expressed point of view of their chief actor.

YOUNG Blake returned to Providence in the winter of 1934-5, taking the upper floor of a venerable dwelling in a grassy court off College Street—on the crest of the great eastward hill near the Brown University campus and behind the marble John Hay Library. It was a cozy and fascinating place, in a little garden oasis of village-like antiquity where huge, friendly cats sunned themselves atop a convenient shed. The square Georgian house had a monitor roof, classic doorway with fan carving, small-paned windows, and all the other earmarks of early Nineteenth Century workmanship. Inside were six-paneled doors, wide floor-boards, a curving colonial staircase, white Adam-period mantels, and a rear set of rooms three steps below the general level.

Blake's study, a large southwest chamber, overlooked the front garden on one side, while its west windows—before one of which he had his desk—faced off from the brow of the hill and commanded a splendid view of the lower town's out-

"He had come to the deserted edifice in quest of a newspaper sensation."

spread roofs and of the mystical sunsets that flamed behind them. On the far horizon were the open countryside's purple slopes. Against these, some two miles away, rose the spectral hump of Federal Hill, bristling with huddled roofs and steeples whose remote outlines wavered mysteriously, taking fantastic forms as the smoke of the city swirled up and enmeshed them. Blake had a curious sense that he was looking upon some unknown, ethereal world which might or might not vanish in dream if ever he tried to seek it out and enter it in person.

Having sent home for most of his books, Blake bought some antique furniture suitable to his quarters and settled down to write and paint—living alone, and attending to the simple housework himself. His studio was in a north attic room, where the panes of the monitor roof furnished admirable lighting. During that first winter he produced five of his best-known short stories—*The Burrower Beneath, The Stairs in the Crypt, Shaggai, In the Vale of Pnath,* and *The Feaster from the Stars*—and painted seven canvases; studies of nameless, unhuman monsters, and profoundly alien, non-terrestrial landscapes.

At sunset he would often sit at his desk and gaze dreamily off at the outspread west—the dark towers of Memorial Hall just below, the Georgian court-house belfry, the lofty pinnacles of the downtown section, and that shimmering, spire-crowned mound in the distance whose unknown streets and labyrinthine gables so potently provoked his fancy. From his few local acquaintances he learned that the far-off slope was a vast Italian quarter, though most of the houses were remnants of older Yankee and Irish days. Now and then he would train his field-glasses on that spectral, unreachable world beyond the curling smoke; picking out individual roofs and chimneys and steeples, and speculating upon the bizarre and curious mysteries they might house. Even with optical aid Federal Hill seemed somehow alien, half fabulous, and linked to the unreal, intangible marvels of Blake's own tales and pictures. The feeling would persist long after the hill had faded into the violet, lamp-starred twilight, and the court-house floodlights and the red Industrial Trust beacon had blazed up to make the night grotesque.

Of all the distant objects on Federal Hill, a certain huge, dark church most fascinated Blake. It stood out with especial distinctness at certain hours of the day, and at sunset the great tower and tapering steeple loomed blackly against the flaming sky. It seemed to rest on especially high ground; for the grimy façade, and the obliquely seen north side with sloping roof and the tops of great pointed windows, rose boldly above the tangle of surrounding ridgepoles and chimney-pots. Peculiarly grim and austere, it appeared to be built of stone, stained and weathered with the smoke and storms of a century and more. The style, so far as the glass could show, was that earliest experimental form of Gothic revival which preceded the stately Upjohn period and held over some of the outlines and proportions of the Georgian age. Perhaps it was reared around 1810 or 1815.

As the months passed, Blake watched the far-off, forbidding structure with an oddly mounting interest. Since the vast windows were never lighted, he knew that it must be vacant. The longer he watched, the more his imagination worked, till at length he began to fancy curious things. He believed that a vague, singular aura of desolation hovered over the place, so that even the pigeons and swallows shunned its smoky eaves. Around other towers and belfries his glass would reveal great flocks of birds,

but here they never rested. At least, that is what he thought and set down in his diary. He pointed the place out to several friends, but none of them had even been on Federal Hill or possessed the faintest notion of what the church was or had been.

In the spring a deep restlessness gripped Blake. He had begun his long-planned novel—based on a supposed survival of the witch-cult in Maine—but was strangely unable to make progress with it. More and more he would sit at his westward window and gaze at the distant hill and the black, frowning steeple shunned by the birds. When the delicate leaves came out on the garden boughs the world was filled with a new beauty, but Blake's restlessness was merely increased. It was then that he first thought of crossing the city and climbing bodily up that fabulous slope into the smoke-wreathed world of dream.

Late in April, just before the eon-shadowed Walpurgis time, Blake made his first trip into the unknown. Plodding through the endless downtown streets and the bleak, decayed squares beyond, he came finally upon the ascending avenue of century-worn steps, sagging Doric porches, and blear-paned cupolas which he felt must lead up to the long-known, unreachable world beyond the mists. There were dingy blue-and-white street signs which meant nothing to him, and presently he noted the strange, dark faces of the drifting crowds, and the foreign signs over curious shops in brown, decade-weathered buildings. Nowhere could he find any of the objects he had seen from afar; so that once more he half fancied that the Federal Hill of that distant view was a dream-world never to be trod by living human feet.

Now and then a battered church façade or crumbling spire came in sight, but never the blackened pile that he sought. When he asked a shopkeeper about a great stone church the man smiled and shook his head, though he spoke English freely. As Blake climbed higher, the region seemed stranger and stranger, with bewildering mazes of brooding brown alleys leading eternally off to the south. He crossed two or three broad avenues, and once thought he glimpsed a familiar tower. Again he asked a merchant about the massive church of stone, and this time he could have sworn that the plea of ignorance was feigned. The dark man's face had a look of fear which he tried to hide, and Blake saw him make a curious sign with his right hand.

Then suddenly a black spire stood out against the cloudy sky on his left, above the tiers of brown roofs lining the tangled southerly alleys. Blake knew at once what it was, and plunged toward it through the squalid, unpaved lanes that climbed from the avenue. Twice he lost his way, but he somehow dared not ask any of the patriarchs or housewives who sat on their door-steps, or any of the children who shouted and played in the mud of the shadowy lanes.

At last he saw the tower plain against the southwest, and a huge stone bulk rose darkly at the end of an alley. Presently he stood in a wind-swept open square, quaintly cobblestoned, with a high bank wall on the farther side. This was the end of his quest; for upon the wide, iron-railed, weed-grown plateau which the wall supported—a separate, lesser world raised fully six feet above the surrounding streets—there stood a grim, titan bulk whose identity, despite Blake's new perspective, was beyond dispute.

The vacant church was in a state of great decrepitude. Some of the high stone buttresses had fallen, and several delicate finials lay half lost among the brown, neglected weeds and grasses. The sooty

Gothic windows were largely unbroken, though many of the stone mullions were missing. Blake wondered how the obscurely painted panes could have survived so well, in view of the known habits of small boys the world over. The massive doors were intact and tightly closed. Around the top of the bank wall, fully enclosing the grounds, was a rusty iron fence whose gate—at the head of a flight of steps from the square—was visibly padlocked. The path from the gate to the building was completely overgrown. Desolation and decay hung like a pall above the place, and in the birdless eaves and black, ivyless walls Blake felt a touch of the dimly sinister beyond his power to define.

There were very few people in the square, but Blake saw a policeman at the northerly end and approached him with questions about the church. He was a great wholesome Irishman, and it seemed odd that he would do little more than make the sign of the cross and mutter that people never spoke of that building. When Blake pressed him he said very hurriedly that the Italian priests warned everybody against it, vowing that a monstrous evil had once dwelt there and left its mark. He himself had heard dark whispers of it from his father, who recalled certain sounds and rumors from his boyhood.

There had been a bad sect there in the ould days—an outlaw sect that called up awful things from some unknown gulf of night. It had taken a good priest to exorcise what had come, though there did be those who said that merely the light could do it. If Father O'Malley were alive there would be many the thing he could tell. But now there was nothing to do but let it alone. It hurt nobody now, and those that owned it were dead or far away. They had run away like rats after the threatening talk in '77, when people began to mind the way folks vanished now and then in the neighborhood. Some day the city would step in and take the property for lack of heirs, but little good would come of annybody's touching it. Better it be left alone for the years to topple, lest things be stirred that ought to rest for ever in their black abyss.

After the policeman had gone Blake stood staring at the sullen steepled pile. It excited him to find that the structure seemed as sinister to others as to him, and he wondered what grain of truth might lie behind the old tales the bluecoat had repeated. Probably they were mere legends evoked by the evil look of the place, but even so, they were like a strange coming to life of one of his own stories.

The afternoon sun came out from behind dispersing clouds, but seemed unable to light up the stained, sooty walls of the old temple that towered on its high plateau. It was odd that the green of spring had not touched the brown, withered growths in the raised, iron-fenced yard. Blake found himself edging nearer the raised area and examining the bank wall and rusted fence for possible avenues of ingress. There was a terrible lure about the blackened fane which was not to be resisted. The fence had no opening near the steps, but around on the north side were some missing bars. He could go up the steps and walk around on the narrow coping outside the fence till he came to the gap. If the people feared the place so wildly, he would encounter no interference.

He was on the embankment and almost inside the fence before anyone noticed him. Then, looking down, he saw the few people in the square edging away and making the same sign with their right hands that the shopkeeper in the avenue had made. Several windows were slammed down, and a fat woman darted

into the street and pulled some small children inside a rickety, unpainted house. The gap in the fence was very easy to pass through, and before long Blake found himself wading amidst the rotting, tangled growths of the deserted yard. Here and there the worn stump of a headstone told him that there had once been burials in this field; but that, he saw, must have been very long ago. The sheer bulk of the church was oppressive now that he was close to it, but he conquered his mood and approached to try the three great doors in the façade. All were securely locked, so he began a circuit of the Cyclopean building in quest of some minor and more penetrable opening. Even then he could not be sure that he wished to enter that haunt of desertion and shadow, yet the pull of its strangeness dragged him on automatically.

A yawning and unprotected cellar window in the rear furnished the needed aperture. Peering in, Blake saw a subterrene gulf of cobwebs and dust faintly litten by the western sun's filtered rays. Debris, old barrels, and ruined boxes and furniture of numerous sorts met his eye, though over everything lay a shroud of dust which softened all sharp outlines. The rusted remains of a hot-air furnace showed that the building had been used and kept in shape as late as mid-Victorian times.

Acting almost without conscious initiative, Blake crawled through the window and let himself down to the dust-carpeted and debris-strewn concrete floor. The vaulted cellar was a vast one, without partitions; and in a corner far to the right, amid dense shadows, he saw a black archway evidently leading upstairs. He felt a peculiar sense of oppression at being actually within the great spectral building, but kept it in check as he cautiously scouted about—finding a still-intact barrel amid the dust, and rolling it over to the open window to provide for his exit. Then, bracing himself, he crossed the wide, cobweb-festooned space toward the arch. Half choked with the omnipresent dust, and covered with ghostly gossamer fibers, he reached and began to climb the worn stone steps which rose into the darkness. He had no light, but groped carefully with his hands. After a sharp turn he felt a closed door ahead, and a little fumbling revealed its ancient latch. It opened inward, and beyond it he saw a dimly illumined corridor lined with worm-eaten paneling.

Once on the ground floor, Blake began exploring in a rapid fashion. All the inner doors were unlocked, so that he freely passed from room to room. The colossal nave was an almost eldritch place with its drifts and mountains of dust over box pews, altar, hour-glass pulpit, and sounding-board, and its titanic ropes of cobweb stretching among the pointed arches of the gallery and entwining the clustered Gothic columns. Over all this hushed desolation played a hideous leaden light as the declining afternoon sun sent its rays through the strange, half-blackened panes of the great apsidal windows.

The paintings on those windows were so obscured by soot that Blake could scarcely decipher what they had represented, but from the little he could make out he did not like them. The designs were largely conventional, and his knowledge of obscure symbolism told him much concerning some of the ancient patterns. The few saints depicted bore expressions distinctly open to criticism, while one of the windows seemed to show merely a dark space with spirals of curious luminosity scattered about in it. Turning away from the windows, Blake noticed that the cobwebbed cross above the altar was not of the ordinary kind,

but resembled the primordial ankh or crux ansata of shadowy Egypt.

In a rear vestry room beside the apse Blake found a rotting desk and ceiling-high shelves of mildewed, disintegrating books. Here for the first time he received a positive shock of objective horror, for the titles of those books told him much. They were the black, forbidden things which most sane people have never even heard of, or have heard of only in furtive, timorous whispers; the banned and dreaded repositories of equivocal secrets and immemorial formulæ which have trickled down the stream of time from the days of man's youth, and the dim, fabulous days before man was. He had himself read many of them—a Latin version of the abhorred *Necronomicon,* the sinister *Liber Ivonis,* the infamous *Cultes des Goules* of Comte d'Erlette, the *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* of von Junzt, and old Ludvig Prinn's hellish *De Vermis Mysteriis.* But there were others he had known merely by reputation or not at all—the *Pnakotic Manuscripts,* the *Book of Dzyan,* and a crumbling volume in wholly unidentifiable characters yet with certain symbols and diagrams shudderingly recognizable to the occult student. Clearly, the lingering local rumors had not lied. This place had once been the seat of an evil older than mankind and wider than the known universe.

In the ruined desk was a small leather-bound record-book filled with entries in some odd cryptographic medium. The manuscript writing consisted of the common traditional symbols used today in astronomy and anciently in alchemy, astrology, and other dubious arts—the devices of the sun, moon, planets, aspects, and zodiacal signs—here massed in solid pages of text, with divisions and paragraphings suggesting that each symbol answered to some alphabetical letter.

In the hope of later solving the cryptogram, Blake bore off this volume in his coat pocket. Many of the great tomes on the shelves fascinated him unutterably, and he felt tempted to borrow them at some later time. He wondered how they could have remained undisturbed so long. Was he the first to conquer the clutching, pervasive fear which had for nearly sixty years protected this deserted place from visitors?

Having now thoroughly explored the ground floor, Blake plowed again through the dust of the spectral nave to the front vestibule, where he had seen a door and staircase presumably leading up to the blackened tower and steeple—objects so long familiar to him at a distance. The ascent was a choking experience, for dust lay thick, while the spiders had done their worst in this constricted place. The staircase was a spiral with high, narrow wooden treads, and now and then Blake passed a clouded window looking dizzily out over the city. Though he had seen no ropes below, he expected to find a bell or peal of bells in the tower whose narrow, louver-boarded lancet windows his field-glass had studied so often. Here he was doomed to disappointment; for when he attained the top of the stairs he found the tower chamber vacant of chimes, and clearly devoted to vastly different purposes.

THE room, about fifteen feet square, was faintly lighted by four lancet windows, one on each side, which were glazed within their screening of decayed louver-boards. These had been further fitted with tight, opaque screens, but the latter were now largely rotted away. In the center of the dust-laden floor rose a curiously angled stone pillar some four feet in height and two in average diameter, covered on each side with bizarre, crudely incised and wholly unrecognizable hieroglyphs. On this pillar rested a metal

box of peculiarly asymmetrical form; its hinged lid thrown back, and its interior holding what looked beneath the decade-deep dust to be an egg-shaped or irregularly spherical object some four inches through. Around the pillar in a rough circle were seven high-backed Gothic chairs still largely intact, while behind them, ranging along the dark-paneled walls, were seven colossal images of crumbling, black-painted plaster, resembling more than anything else the cryptic carven megaliths of mysterious Easter Island. In one corner of the cobwebbed chamber a ladder was built into the wall, leading up to the closed trap-door of the windowless steeple above.

As Blake grew accustomed to the feeble light he noticed odd bas-reliefs on the strange open box of yellowish metal. Approaching, he tried to clear the dust away with his hands and handkerchief, and saw that the figurings were of a monstrous and utterly alien kind; depicting entities which, though seemingly alive, resembled no known life-form ever evolved on this planet. The four-inch seeming sphere turned out to be a nearly black, red-striated polyhedron with many irregular flat surfaces; either a very remarkable crystal of some sort, or an artificial object of carved and highly polished mineral matter. It did not touch the bottom of the box, but was held suspended by means of a metal band around its center, with seven queerly-designed supports extending horizontally to angles of the box's inner wall near the top. This stone, once exposed, exerted upon Blake an almost alarming fascination. He could scarcely tear his eyes from it, and as he looked at its glistening surfaces he almost fancied it was transparent, with half-formed worlds of wonder within. Into his mind floated pictures of alien orbs with great stone towers, and other orbs with titan mountains and no mark of life, and still remoter spaces where only a stirring in vague blacknesses told of the presence of consciousness and will.

When he did look away, it was to notice a somewhat singular mound of dust in the far corner near the ladder to the steeple. Just why it took his attention he could not tell, but something in its contours carried a message to his unconscious mind. Plowing toward it, and brushing aside the hanging cobwebs as he went, he began to discern something grim about it. Hand and handkerchief soon revealed the truth, and Blake gasped with a baffling mixture of emotions. It was a human skeleton, and it must have been there for a very long time. The clothing was in shreds, but some buttons and fragments of cloth bespoke a man's gray suit. There were other bits of evidence—shoes, metal clasps, huge buttons for round cuffs, a stickpin of bygone pattern, a reporter's badge with the name of the old *Providence Telegram,* and a crumbling leather pocket-book. Blake examined the latter with care, finding within it several bills of antiquated issue, a celluloid advertising calendar for 1893, some cards with the name "Edwin M. Lillibridge," and a paper covered with penciled memoranda.

This paper held much of a puzzling nature, and Blake read it carefully at the dim westward window. Its disjointed text included such phrases as the following:

"Prof. Enoch Bowen home from Egypt May 1844—buys old Free-Will Church in July—his archæological work & studies in occult well known."

"Dr. Drowne of 4th Baptist warns against Starry Wisdom in sermon Dec. 29, 1844."

"Congregation 97 by end of '45."

"1846—3 disappearances—first mention of Shining Trapezohedron."

"7 disappearances 1848—stories of blood sacrifice begin."

"Investigation 1853 comes to nothing—stories of sounds."

"Fr. O'Malley tells of devil-worship with

box found in great Egyptian ruins—says they call up something that can't exist in light. Flees a little light, and banished by strong light. Then has to be summoned again. Probably got this from deathbed confession of Francis X. Feeney, who had joined Starry Wisdom in '49. These people say the Shining Trapezohedron shows them heaven & other worlds, & that the Haunter of the Dark tells them secrets in some way."

"Story of Orrin B. Eddy 1857. They call it up by gazing at the crystal, & have a sceret language of their own."

"200 or more in cong. 1863, exclusive of men at front."

"Irish boys mob church in 1869 after Patrick Regan's disappearance."

"Veiled article in J. March 14, '72, but people don't talk about it."

"6 disappearances 1876—secret committee calls on Mayor Doyle."

"Action promised Feb. 1877—church closes in April."

"Gang—Federal Hill Boys—threaten Dr. ——— and vestrymen in May."

"181 persons leave city before end of '77—mention no names."

"Ghost stories begin around 1880—try to ascertain truth of report that no human being has entered church since 1877."

"Ask Lanigan for photograph of place taken 1851." . . .

RESTORING the paper to the pocketbook and placing the latter in his coat, Blake turned to look down at the skeleton in the dust. The implications of the notes were clear, and there could be no doubt but that this man had come to the deserted edifice forty-two years before in quest of a newspaper sensation which no one else had been bold enough to attempt. Perhaps no one else had known of his plan—who could tell? But he had never returned to his paper. Had some bravely-suppressed fear risen to overcome him and bring on sudden heart-failure? Blake stooped over the gleaming bones and noted their peculiar state. Some of them were badly scattered, and a few seemed oddly *dissolved* at the ends. Others were strangely yellowed, with vague suggestions of charring. This charring extended to some of the fragments of clothing. The skull was in a very peculiar state—stained yellow, and with a charred aperture in the top as if some powerful acid had eaten through the solid bone. What had happened to the skeleton during its four decades of silent entombment here Blake could not imagine.

Before he realized it, he was looking at the stone again, and letting its curious influence call up a nebulous pageantry in his mind. He saw processions of robed, hooded figures whose outlines were not human, and looked on endless leagues of desert lined with carved, sky-reaching monoliths. He saw towers and walls in nighted depths under the sea, and vortices of space where wisps of black mist floated before thin shimmerings of cold purple haze. And beyond all else he glimpsed an infinite gulf of sheer darkness, where solid and semi-solid forms were known only by their windy stirrings, and cloudy patterns of force seemed to superimpose order on chaos and hold forth a key to all the paradoxes and arcana of the worlds we know.

Then all at once the spell was broken by an access of gnawing, indeterminate panic fear. Blake choked and turned away from the stone, conscious of some formless alien presence close to him and watching him with horrible intentness. He felt entangled with something—something which was not in the stone, but which had looked through it at him—something which would ceaselessly follow him with a cognition that was not physical sight. Plainly, the place was getting on his nerves—as well it might in view of his gruesome find. The light was waning, too, and since he had no illuminant with him he knew he would have to be leaving soon.

It was then, in the gathering twilight,

that he thought he saw a faint trace of luminosity in the crazily angled stone. He had tried to look away from it, but some obscure compulsion drew his eyes back. Was there a subtle phosphorescence of radio-activity about the thing? What was it that the dead man's notes had said concerning a *Shining Trapezohedron?* What, anyway, was this abandoned lair of cosmic evil? What had been done here, and what might still be lurking in the bird-shunned shadows? It seemed now as if an elusive touch of fetor had arisen somewhere close by, though its source was not apparent. Blake seized the cover of the long-open box and snapped it down. It moved easily on its alien hinges, and closed completely over the unmistakably glowing stone.

At the sharp click of that closing a soft stirring sound seemed to come from the steeple's eternal blackness overhead, beyond the trap-door. Rats, without question—the only living things to reveal their presence in this accursed pile since he had entered it. And yet that stirring in the steeple frightened him horribly, so that he plunged almost wildly down the spiral stairs, across the ghoulish nave, into the vaulted basement, out amidst the gathering dusk of the deserted square, and down through the teeming, fear-haunted alleys and avenues of Federal Hill toward the sane central streets and the home-like brick sidewalks of the college district.

During the days which followed, Blake told no one of his expedition. Instead, he read much in certain books, examined long years of newspaper files downtown, and worked feverishly at the cryptogram in that leather volume from the cobwebbed vestry room. The cipher, he soon saw, was no simple one; and after a long period of endeavor he felt sure that its language could not be English, Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Italian, or German. Evidently he would have to draw upon the deepest wells of his strange erudition.

Every evening the old impulse to gaze westward returned, and he saw the black steeple as of yore amongst the bristling roofs of a distant and half-fabulous world. But now it held a fresh note of terror for him. He knew the heritage of evil lore it masked, and with the knowledge his vision ran riot in queer new ways. The birds of spring were returning, and as he watched their sunset flights he fancied they avoided the gaunt, lone spire as never before. When a flock of them approached it, he thought, they would wheel and scatter in panic confusion—and he could guess at the wild twitterings which failed to reach him across the intervening miles.

It was in June that Blake's diary told of his victory over the cryptogram. The text was, he found, in the dark Aklo language used by certain cults of evil antiquity, and known to him in a halting way through previous researches. The diary is strangely reticent about what Blake deciphered, but he was patently awed and disconcerted by his results. There are references to a Haunter of the Dark awaked by gazing into the Shining Trapezohedron, and insane conjectures about the black gulfs of chaos from which it was called. The being is spoken of as holding all knowledge, and demanding monstrous sacrifices. Some of Blake's entries show fear lest the thing, which he seemed to regard as summoned, stalk abroad; though he adds that the street-lights form a bulwark which cannot be crossed.

Of the Shining Trapezohedron he speaks often, calling it a window on all time and space, and tracing its history from the days it was fashioned on dark Yuggoth, before ever the Old Ones

brought it to earth. It was treasured and placed in its curious box by the crinoid things of Antarctica, salvaged from their ruins by the serpent-men of Valusia, and peered at eons later in Lemuria by the first human beings. It crossed strange lands and stranger seas, and sank with Atlantis before a Minoan fisher meshed it in his net and sold it to swarthy merchants from nighted Khem. The Pharaoh Nephren-Ka built around it a temple with a windowless crypt, and did that which caused his name to be stricken from all monuments and records. Then it slept in the ruins of that evil fane which the priests and the new Pharaoh destroyed, till the delver's spade once more brought it forth to curse mankind.

Early in July the newspapers oddly supplement Blake's entries, though in so brief and casual a way that only the diary has called general attention to their contribution. It appears that a new fear had been growing on Federal Hill since a stranger had entered the dreaded church. The Italians whispered of unaccustomed stirrings and bumpings and scrapings in the dark windowless steeple, and called on their priests to banish an entity which haunted their dreams. Something, they said, was constantly watching at a door to see if it were dark enough to venture forth. Press items mentioned the long-standing local superstitions, but failed to shed much light on the earlier background of the horror. It was obvious that the young reporters of today are no antiquarians. In writing of these things in his diary, Blake expresses a curious kind of remorse, and talks of the duty of burying the Shining Trapezohedron and of banishing what he had evoked by letting daylight into the hideous jutting spire. At the same time, however, he displays the dangerous extent of his fascination, and admits a morbid longing—pervading even his dreams—to visit the accursed tower and gaze again into the cosmic secrets of the glowing stone.

Then something in the *Journal* on the morning of July 17 threw the diarist into a veritable fever of horror. It was only a variant of the other half-humorous items about the Federal Hill restlessness, but to Blake it was somehow very terrible indeed. In the night a thunderstorm had put the city's lighting-system out of commission for a full hour, and in that black interval the Italians had nearly gone mad with fright. Those living near the dreaded church had sworn that the thing in the steeple had taken advantage of the street lamps' absence and gone down into the body of the church, flopping and bumping around in a viscous, altogether dreadful way. Toward the last it had bumped up to the tower, where there were sounds of the shattering of glass. It could go wherever the darkness reached, but light would always send it fleeing.

When the current blazed on again there had been a shocking commotion in the tower, for even the feeble light trickling through the grime-blackened, louver-boarded windows was too much for the thing. It had bumped and slithered up into its tenebrous steeple just in time—for a long dose of light would have sent it back into the abyss whence the crazy stranger had called it. During the dark hour praying crowds had clustered round the church in the rain with lighted candles and lamps somehow shielded with folded papers and umbrellas—a guard of light to save the city from the nightmare that stalks in darkness. Once, those nearest the church declared, the outer door had rattled hideously.

But even this was not the worst. That evening in the *Bulletin* Blake read of what the reporters had found. Aroused at last to the whimsical news value of the scare, a pair of them had defied the frantic crowds of Italians and crawled into

the church through the cellar window after trying the doors in vain. They found the dust of the vestibule and of the spectral nave plowed up in a singular way, with pits of rotted cushions and satin pew-linings scattered curiously around. There was a bad odor everywhere, and here and there were bits of yellow stain and patches of what looked like charring. Opening the door to the tower, and pausing a moment at the suspicion of a scraping sound above, they found the narrow spiral stairs wiped roughly clean.

In the tower itself a similarly half-swept condition existed. They spoke of the heptagonal stone pillar, the overturned Gothic chairs, and the bizarre plaster images; though strangely enough the metal box and the old mutilated skeleton were not mentioned. What disturbed Blake the most—except for the hints of stains and charring and bad odors—was the final detail that explained the crashing glass. Every one of the tower's lancet windows was broken, and two of them had been darkened in a crude and hurried way by the stuffing of satin pew-linings and cushion-horsehair into the spaces between the slanting exterior louver-boards. More satin fragments and bunches of horsehair lay scattered around the newly swept floor, as if someone had been interrupted in the act of restoring the tower to the absolute blackness of its tightly curtained days.

Yellowish stains and charred patches were found on the ladder to the windowless spire, but when a reporter climbed up, opened the horizontally-sliding trapdoor and shot a feeble flashlight beam into the black and strangely fetid space, he saw nothing but darkness, and an heterogeneous litter of shapeless fragments near the aperture. The verdict, of course, was charlatanry. Somebody had played a joke on the superstitious hill-dwellers, or else some fanatic had striven to bolster up their fears for their own supposed good. Or perhaps some of the younger and more sophisticated dwellers had staged an elaborate hoax on the outside world. There was an amusing aftermath when the police sent an officer to verify the reports. Three men in succession found ways of evading the assignment, and the fourth went very reluctantly and returned very soon without adding to the account given by the reporters.

From this point onward Blake's diary shows a mounting tide of insidious horror and nervous apprehension. He upbraids himself for not doing something, and speculates wildly on the consequences of another electrical breakdown. It has been verified that on three occasions—during thunderstorms—he telephoned the electric light company in a frantic vein and asked that desperate precautions against a lapse of power be taken. Now and then his entries show concern over the failure of the reporters to find the metal box and stone, and the strangely marred old skeleton, when they explored the shadowy tower room. He assumed that these things had been removed—whither, and by whom or what, he could only guess. But his worst fears concerned himself, and the kind of unholy rapport he felt to exist between his mind and that lurking horror in the distant steeple—that monstrous thing of night which his rashness had called out of the ultimate black spaces. He seemed to feel a constant tugging at his will, and callers of that period remember how he would sit abstractedly at his desk and stare out the west window at that far-off, spire-bristling mound beyond the swirling smoke of the city. His entries dwell monotonously on certain terrible dreams, and of a strengthening of the unholy rapport in his sleep. There is

mention of a night when he awaked to find himself fully dressed, outdoors, and headed automatically down College Hill toward the west. Again and again he dwells on the fact that the thing in the steeple knows where to find him.

The week following July 30 is recalled as the time of Blake's partial breakdown. He did not dress, and ordered all his food by telephone. Visitors remarked the cords he kept near his bed, and he said that sleep-walking had forced him to bind his ankles every night with knots which would probably hold or else waken him with the labor of untying.

In his diary he told of the hideous experience which had brought the collapse. After retiring on the night of the 30th he had suddenly found himself groping about in an almost black space. All he could see were short, faint, horizontal streaks of bluish light, but he could smell an overpowering fetor and hear a curious jumble of soft, furtive sounds above him. Whenever he moved he stumbled over something, and at each noise there would come a sort of answering sound from above—a vague stirring, mixed with the cautious sliding of wood on wood.

Once his groping hands encountered a pillar of stone with a vacant top, whilst later he found himself clutching the rungs of a ladder built into the wall, and fumbling his uncertain way upward toward some region of intenser stench where a hot, searing blast beat down against him. Before his eyes a kaleidoscopic range of fantasmal images played, all of them dissolving at intervals into the picture of a vast, unplumbed abyss of night wherein whirled suns and worlds of an even profounder blackness. He thought of the ancient legends of Ultimate Chaos, at whose center sprawls the blind idiot god Azathoth, Lord of All Things, encircled by his flopping horde of mindless and amorphous dancers, and lulled by the thin monotonous piping of a demoniac flute held in nameless paws.

Then a sharp report from the outer world broke through his stupor and roused him to the unutterable horror of his position. What it was, he never knew—perhaps it was some belated peal from the fireworks heard all summer on Federal Hill as the dwellers hail their various patron saints, or the saints of their native villages in Italy. In any event he shrieked aloud, dropped frantically from the ladder, and stumbled blindly across the obstructed floor of the almost lightless chamber that encompassed him.

He knew instantly where he was, and plunged recklessly down the narrow spiral staircase, tripping and bruising himself at every turn. There was a nightmare flight through a vast cobwebbed nave whose ghostly arches reached up to realms of leering shadow, a sightless scramble through a littered basement, a climb to regions of air and street lights outside, and a mad racing down a spectral hill of gibbering gables, across a grim, silent city of tall black towers, and up the steep eastward precipice to his own ancient door.

On regaining consciousness in the morning he found himself lying on his study floor fully dressed. Dirt and cobwebs covered him, and every inch of his body seemed sore and bruised. When he faced the mirror he saw that his hair was badly scorched, while a trace of strange, evil odor seemed to cling to his upper outer clothing. It was then that his nerves broke down. Thereafter, lounging exhaustedly about in a dressing-gown, he did little but stare from his west window, shiver at the threat of thunder, and make wild entries in his diary.

THE great storm broke just before midnight on August 8th. Lightning struck repeatedly in all parts of the city,

and two remarkable fireballs were reported. The rain was torrential, while a constant fusillade of thunder brought sleeplessness to thousands. Blake was utterly frantic in his fear for the lighting system, and tried to telephone the company around one a. m., though by that time service had been temporarily cut off in the interest of safety. He recorded everything in his diary—the large, nervous, and often undecipherable hieroglyphs telling their own story of growing frenzy and despair, and of entries scrawled blindly in the dark.

He had to keep the house dark in order to see out the window, and it appears that most of his time was spent at his desk, peering anxiously through the rain across the glistening miles of downtown roofs at the constellation of distant lights marking Federal Hill. Now and then he would fumblingly make an entry in his diary, so that detached phrases such as "The lights must not go"; "It knows where I am"; "I must destroy it"; and "It is calling to me, but perhaps it means no injury this time"; are found scattered down two of the pages.

Then the lights went out all over the city. It happened at 2:12 a. m. according to power-house records, but Blake's diary gives no indication of the time. The entry is merely, "Lights out—God help me." On Federal Hill there were watchers as anxious as he, and rain-soaked knots of men paraded the square and alleys around the evil church with umbrella-shaded candles, electric flashlights, oil lanterns, crucifixes, and obscure charms of the many sorts common to southern Italy. They blessed each flash of lightning, and made cryptical signs of fear with their right hands when a turn in the storm caused the flashes to lessen and finally to cease altogether. A rising wind blew out most of the candles, so that the scene grew threateningly dark. Someone roused Father Merluzzo of Spirito Santo Church, and he hastened to the dismal square to pronounce whatever helpful syllables he could. Of the restless and curious sounds in the blackened tower, there could be no doubt whatever.

For what happened at 2:35 we have the testimony of the priest, a young, intelligent, and well-educated person; of Patrolman William J. Monahan of the Central Station, an officer of the highest reliability who had paused at that part of his beat to inspect the crowd; and of most of the seventy-eight men who had gathered around the church's high bank wall—especially those in the square where the eastward façade was visible. Of course there was nothing which can be proved as being outside the order of nature. The possible causes of such an event are many. No one can speak with certainty of the obscure chemical processes arising in a vast, ancient, ill-aired, and long-deserted building of heterogeneous contents. Mephitic vapors—spontaneous combustion—pressure of gases born of long decay—any one of numberless phenomena might be responsible. And then, of course, the factor of conscious charlatanry can by no means be excluded. The thing was really quite simple in itself, and covered less than three minutes of actual time. Father Merluzzo, always a precise man, looked at his watch repeatedly.

It started with a definite swelling of the dull fumbling sounds inside the black tower. There had for some time been a vague exhalation of strange, evil odors from the church, and this had now become emphatic and offensive. Then at last there was a sound of splintering wood, and a large, heavy object crashed down in the yard beneath the frowning easterly façade. The tower was invisible now that the candles would not burn, but as the object neared the ground the people knew that it was the smoke-grimed

louver-boarding of that tower's east window.

Immediately afterward an utterly unbearable fetor welled forth from the unseen heights, choking and sickening the trembling watchers, and almost prostrating those in the square. At the same time the air trembled with a vibration as of flapping wings, and a sudden east-blowing wind more violent than any previous blast snatched off the hats and wrenched the dripping umbrellas of the crowd. Nothing definite could be seen in the candleless night, though some upward-looking spectators thought they glimpsed a great spreading blur of denser blackness against the inky sky—something like a formless cloud of smoke that shot with meteor-like speed toward the east.

That was all. The watchers were half numbed with fright, awe, and discomfort, and scarcely knew what to do, or whether to do anything at all. Not knowing what had happened, they did not relax their vigil; and a moment later they sent up a prayer as a sharp flash of belated lightning, followed by an ear-splitting crash of sound, rent the flooded heavens. Half an hour later the rain stopped, and in fifteen minutes more the street lights sprang on again, sending the weary, bedraggled watchers relievedly back to their homes.

The next day's papers gave these matters minor mention in connection with the general storm reports. It seems that the great lightning flash and deafening explosion which followed the Federal Hill occurrence were even more tremendous farther east, where a burst of the singular fetor was likewise noticed. The phenomenon was most marked over College Hill, where the crash awaked all the sleeping inhabitants and led to a bewildered round of speculations. Of those who were already awake only a few saw the anomalous blaze of light near the top of the hill, or noticed the inexplicable upward rush of air which almost stripped the leaves from the trees and blasted the plants in the gardens. It was agreed that the lone, sudden lightning-bolt must have struck somewhere in this neighborhood, though no trace of its striking could afterward be found. A youth in the Tau Omega fraternity house thought he saw a grotesque and hideous mass of smoke in the air just as the preliminary flash burst, but his observation has not been verified. All of the few observers, however, agree as to the violent gust from the west and the flood of intolerable stench which preceded the belated stroke; whilst evidence concerning the momentary burned odor after the stroke is equally general.

These points were discussed very carefully because of their probable connection with the death of Robert Blake. Students in the Psi Delta house, whose upper rear windows looked into Blake's study, noticed the blurred white face at the westward window on the morning of the 9th, and wondered what was wrong with the expression. When they saw the same face in the same position that evening, they felt worried, and watched for the lights to come up in his apartment. Later they rang the bell of the darkened flat, and finally had a policeman force the door.

The rigid body sat bolt upright at the desk by the window, and when the intruders saw the glassy, bulging eyes, and the marks of stark, convulsive fright on the twisted features, they turned away in sickened dismay. Shortly afterward the coroner's physician made an examination, and despite the unbroken window reported electrical shock, or nervous tension induced by an electrical discharge, as the cause of death. The hideous expression he ignored altogether, deeming it a not improbable result of the profound shock

as experienced by a person of such abnormal imagination and unbalanced emotions. He deduced these latter qualities from the books, paintings, and manuscripts found in the apartment, and from the blindly scrawled entries in the diary on the desk. Blake had prolonged his frenzied jottings to the last, and the broken-pointed pencil was found clutched in his spasmodically contracted right hand.

THE entries after the failure of the lights were highly disjointed, and legible only in part. From them certain investigators have drawn conclusions differing greatly from the materialistic official verdict, but such speculations have little chance for belief among the conservative. The case of these imaginative theorists has not been helped by the action of superstitious Doctor Dexter, who threw the curious box and angled stone—an object certainly self-luminous as seen in the black windowless steeple where it was found—into the deepest channel of Narragansett Bay. Excessive imagination and neurotic unbalance on Blake's part, aggravated by knowledge of the evil bygone cult whose startling traces he had uncovered, form the dominant interpretation given those final frenzied jottings. These are the entries—or all that can be made of them.

"Lights still out—must be five minutes now. Everything depends on lightning. Yaddith grant it will keep up! . . . Some influence seems beating through it. . . . Rain and thunder and wind deafen. . . . The thing is taking hold of my mind. . . .

"Trouble with memory. I see things I never knew before. Other worlds and other galaxies. . . . Dark. . . . The lightning seems dark and the darkness seems light. . . .

"It cannot be the real hill and church that I see in the pitch-darkness. Must be retinal impression left by flashes. Heaven grant the Italians are out with their candles if the lightning stops!

"What am I afraid of? Is it not an avatar of Nyarlathotep, who in antique and shadowy Khem even took the form of man? I remember Yuggoth, and more distant Shaggai, and the ultimate void of the black planets. . . .

"The long, winging flight through the void . . . cannot cross the universe of light . . . re-created by the thoughts caught in the Shining Trapezohedron . . . send it through the horrible abysses of radiance. . . .

"My name is Blake—Robert Harrison Blake of 620 East Knapp Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. . . . I am on this planet. . . .

"Azathoth have mercy!—the lightning no longer flashes—horrible—I can see everything with a monstrous sense that is not sight—light is dark and dark is light . . . those people on the hill . . . guard . . . candles and charms . . . their priests. . . .

"Sense of distance gone—far is near and near is far. No light—no glass—see that steeple—that tower—window—can hear—Roderick Usher—am mad or going mad—the thing is stirring and fumbling in the tower—I am it and it is I—I want to get out . . . must get out and unify the forces. . . . It knows where I am. . . .

"I am Robert Blake, but I see the tower in the dark. There is a monstrous odor . . . senses transfigured . . . boarding at that tower window cracking and giving way. . . . Iä . . . ngai . . . ygg. . . .

"I see it—coming here—hell-wind—titan blur — black wings — Yog-Sothoth save me — the three-lobed burning eye. . . ."

Portrait of a Murderer

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

An odd story of hypnotic power and a gruesome tragedy in the chasm that yawns at the foot of Coniston Crag

I AM A medium; for reference purposes only I give my name as Henry Clifton of London. As to the extent of my psychic abilities, I have little to say. Also do I withdraw from all responsibility for the messages which came to me from John Carlow Moore after he had been executed at ——— jail on February 9th, 1936. I only know that he chose me of all men to take his communications, the essence of which I have recorded here, verbatim.

* * * * *

MY NAME is John Carlow Moore. I first became acquainted with Enoch Pym in July of 1934. It happened in the casual manner common to potential vital happenings. I had taken a brief holiday among the lakes, and there, at my little hotel near Coniston, reposed the man for whom I was destined to commit murder.

A curious fellow, Pym—short, inclined to be stout, with wild and disordered black hair surmounting a podgy, pasty face. This general facial outline, lent added insipidness by a big, somewhat pendulous mouth and pale yet searching blue eyes, did little to make him prepossessing, and yet he held an uncanny fascination for me from the first moment I set eyes on him.

Odd though it may sound, I am half inclined to think that it was his delightful voice that interested me. Nowhere had I ever heard so mellow an intonation, so smooth and flawless a diction.

He came into my life on my second day at the Lakes, I remember. I had returned from a happy, solo jaunt to Rydal to find him in the low, old-fashioned dining-room of my country hotel. He was seated at the spotless tea-table eating poached eggs on toast, and surrounded by cakes, sugar, milk and tea-pot. Prosaic details, I know, and yet they were such integral, immovable adjuncts of that first survey. He smiled at me pleasantly as I entered, and soon I was keeping him company with another poached egg. For a long time we were silent, mentally weighing each other up as two Englishmen meeting for the first time in a lonely spot are wont to do; then at last he spoke and that wonderful voice fell on my ears for the first time.

"My name is Pym—Enoch Pym," he explained. "Just up for a few days' fishing—along with other matters."

I returned the introduction, told him of my efforts to escape hard work as a journalist for a week, and went on to elaborate on my inborn love for the Cumberland scenery. We talked far beyond the cakes and cigarettes, ultimately continuing as we took an evening stroll toward Coniston village itself.

In a remarkably short space of time we had become the best of friends, which in itself was peculiar, for I had the journalist's intuition for detecting suspicious characters. Certainly I never felt in Pym's presence that there was somewhere in his make-up a streak of incarnate cruelty.

Upon that glorious evening he was civility itself. He revealed an amazing

knowledge of all subjects I touched upon, from the printing of newspapers to affairs of the occult. And all the time his superb voice lulled me into a curious submission; it droned on and on, merging flawlessly into the calm perfection of that summer eve. To our left lay Coniston Water; to the right the gaunt and stern escarpments of Coniston Old Man, backed by the sullen ramparts of Dow Crags, and farther to the north, its grim needle-pointed spires piercing the misty gray of the paling sky, stood Helvellyan.

Altogether then, it was a tranquil enough environment for two men with apparently kindred interests. We were alone on this single wooded road leading to Coniston, and I think it was this very isolation that caused me to listen with credence to Pym's observations on the subjects of mysticism, hypnotism, and the supernatural. Most certainly I would never have listened with half as much seriousness in my native London.

"Suppose," he said suddenly, jabbing a well-gnawed pipe in the air, "that you

"A body falling into that chasm is bound to be destroyed."

were to die. Do you think you could find the way back? To here?"

I shook my head. "I don't think I could. Mind you, I believe in after-life, but only as a closed book—an untouchable plane from which mortals of this plane cannot communicate."

He seemed to ponder over that. We walked on again in silence for a space, smoking and pursuing our own thoughts; then he suddenly resumed,

"Frankly, Mr. Moore, I came up to the Lakes here to make an experiment. One might call it an experiment with hypnotism. I was expecting to commandeer the services of a farmer or laborer for my purposes, but since a good Providence has placed me in contact with you I feel that perhaps you might——"

"Why, surely!" I exclaimed. "If I can be of any service at all I shall be only too pleased. After all, two men in a lonely spot like this . . . well, any experiment is welcome. What exactly are you going to do?"

"I don't quite know yet."

He stopped in mid-stride and cast a glance at the darkening sky. "It's getting dark, Mr. Moore," he remarked, as though the topic of hypnotism had never been mentioned. "We had better be getting back."

THAT, I say, was how I met Pym. I have tried to convey my first reactions to his peculiar nature. He seemed, as I was with him day after day, to be pursuing some strange chimera of his own which controlled him with relentless power. Although he was always civil and pleasing, I had no doubts whatever about the moments of calm in which I often surprized him.

While out walking with him this odd facet of his nature was completely absent. He would talk in that fascinating, half-husky voice of his and throw out quite meaningless comments about his intended experiment—but within the staid and almost gloomy walls of our little hotel he would relapse again.

More often than not I found him gazing through the window at the stern bulk of Coniston Old Man, shifting his gaze only to take in the view of the sullen ramparts of Dow Crags to the left of the mountain. It was as though they held for him an intangible magnetism, as though they stimulated within him some unsuspected mental foible. And once I caught him muttering half aloud, quite unaware of my presence in the low-ceilinged room.

". . . it is a fate which I shall administer justly, not with my own hands, but with all the resources of my brain. There can be no other way."

Strange observation indeed! I was looking at him curiously when he became abruptly aware of my presence. With a curious smile he joined me at the tea-table and, with characteristic calmness, made no reference to his strange behavior.

"My wife is joining me tonight," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice, pouring out tea.

This was a surprize to me; I had not even suspected he was married.

"I'm glad for your sake, Pym, but I shall miss our little walks," I smiled. "Really, I've enjoyed them."

He gazed at me with the oddest light in his eyes. I don't know whether you have ever seen pale blue eyes with the evening sun catching them sideways. That was how it was at that moment. The strong summer evening light was streaming through the end window of the room and bathed one-half of his pe-

culiar podgy face in intense radiance. Such effect threw the eyes into relief: they stared at me like glass circles, limpid blue rings with an intensely dark spot of pupil in their centers. Just for an instant they chilled me, stirred something strongly in my brain. In those moments it seemed as though the entire soul of Enoch Pym was laid bare before me. Here, I knew, was a man to be wary of; and yet his wonderful voice gripped me in its inexplicable spell again as he began to speak.

"I really see no reason why our walks should be interfered with," he remarked calmly, his eyes still upon me. "I too have enjoyed them. The quiet mountain scenery, our mutual sociability—these are things to be treasured for their very rarity, Moore. As to my wife, she will not interfere with us. She is a strange woman, moody, usually lost in introspections. I fancy she is only joining me because she enjoys mountain air. Certainly it is not my company she is seeking."

"No, no—I see," I nodded quickly, and rather than pry into the mysteries of his domestic life I let the matter drop. For quite a time silence persisted between us, but I could feel his eyes upon me; then back came the superb diction to smooth my puzzled reflections.

"You will not like my wife, Moore."

"No?" I looked up to meet the eyes. "Why do you say that? I get on with most people."

"Maybe, but you won't with my wife. You see, you will meet as enemies; you will not like her; your dislike will grow, too. Do you understand that, Moore? You will hate her—*hate* her!"

"I—I shall hate her," I agreed slowly, trying to tear my eyes away from his, away from the bright glitter of the tea-things, the reflections from the silver teapot, the glare from the reflecting mirror on the wall; above all from those two pale blue pools in the expressionless face. . . . If only I could break the spell of that perfect voice of his! Its perfection sank into every fiber of my being; for a time, how long I do not know, I was in a world that shimmered and danced with bright sunlights, in a world mastered and controlled by a voice, that assured me I would hate the woman Betty Pym. Finally, I knew I *would* hate her, but for heaven's sake do not ask me why!

"Marmalade?" he asked suddenly, and I shot out of my vague, indeterminate realm of cloudy thoughts and speculations to find him holding the silver-edged receptacle almost under my nose. Again the reflected sunlight beat from it into my eyes so that I blinked.

"Sorry," I said with an apologetic laugh, taking it from him. "I—I was day-dreaming, I think. You said something about your wife, I believe?"

"Did I?" He shrugged slightly: the man was an absolute chameleon of character—he veered perpetually from one thing to another, leaving me the more mystified every time. "Perhaps I did," he agreed doubtfully, lighting a cigarette. "We don't get on very well, Betty and I. . . . However, never mind. It won't interfere with our walks."

And as though to substantiate it we went out again after tea.

2

It was upon that evening that he went to endless trouble to point out to me the particular advantages and defects of Coniston Old Man and Dow Crags. I remember that we walked in the clear, sweet wind to the base of the mountain and there sat down upon a massive boulder. Pym had a heavy ebony walking-

stick with him, and with this he began to point out to my interested gaze certain landmarks with which he was manifestly extremely familiar.

"You will notice, Moore, that at the extreme left of the mountain summit there is a chasm, all of seven hundred feet in depth, practically sheer, while opposite stand Dow Crags?"

I nodded, shading my eyes from the glaring sun. His voice went on.

"The Dow Crags are available only to trained climbers, but anybody can climb the Old Man himself. Up the chasm between the two there blows a perpetual wind; it is not uncommon for climbers to slip and be carried away by it. And a body falling from either the Crags or the Old Man into that chasm would be bound to be destroyed."

"I see," I answered, and although I have a reasonably good memory I never retained information with such vivid clarity before. It seemed as though the things he had told me had been driven into my brain with sledgehammer force; I soaked them in, pondered them, reiterated them to myself all through the remainder of our evening ramble.

He talked on all kinds of topics afterward, but I cannot remember one of them. My whole mind was obsessed by the knowledge of a chasm and the fact that I hated his wife! Curious? Yes, perhaps it was. There was I, a perfectly sane journalist up for a fishing holiday, completely in the toils of this enigmatic man with the glorious voice and magnetic eyes. Try though I would I could not shake off his personality. It held me body and soul.

When we did ultimately arrive back at the hotel his wife had arrived. My first impression of her as she sat in the tiny dining-room, clearly illuminated in the specially generated electric light, was quite a favorable one. I completely forgot, for the time being, my ridiculous resolves to hate her.

She was a small dark woman with a pale, aristocratic face and oddly frightened brown eyes. From her appearance, I could better have imagined her as Pym's daughter instead of his wife. Clearly he was considerably older.

He introduced us with that calm way he had, taking instant and masterful possession of the situation. She, for her part, remained strangely quiet, eating supper in silence and replying only in monosyllables to her husband's inquiries as to her state of health, journey from home, and reactions to the Lake District.

It required little effort on my part to apprehend that there was a strong estrangement between them, though what it was I was too discreet to ask. I wondered too whether Pym had really told me I would hate her or whether I had imagined it. Certainly I could find nothing in her to dislike even. She was interesting, but nothing more. The domination of Pym completely overshadowed her. . . .

Finally, sensing how strained matters were, I went up to bed—and not half an hour later dropped into a doze. . . .

THE instant I dropped asleep, as it seemed, I became the prey for terrible and Satanic nightmares. All the events of the day rose up before me in a solid conglomeration, intensely magnified and potent, in the midst of which I struggled like a lost soul. There was Pym with his beautiful voice—Pym, receding, advancing, receding in perpetual reiteration; all face, now nothing but two unblinking eyes of pale and heartless blue illumined by a strong diagonal light. Once again the flash and glitter of silvered tea-things smote upon my tortured vision.

"You will hate my wife, Moore! You will hate my wife, Moore! You will hate my——" On and on, endlessly—a crazy, raging diapason of chanting words, merging into the major lunacy of the whole horrible occurrence.

Then presently he seemed to blur, but still I heard his voice ringing loud and clear in the now disordered emptinesses of my mind.

"A body falling into that chasm would be bound to be destroyed. . . ."

The voice receded, but the dream was as vivid as ever. I was staggering desperately, half clothed, up the ragged side of Coniston Old Man! About me, in the chilling wind—for I seemed to be nearly at the summit of the mountain—stood the moonlit desolations of boulders and stones. Far below, a reflected silver streak, lay Coniston Water. Something was weighing me down tremendously. To my surprize I discovered that it was a body—a woman's body! Apparently I had carried her all the way up the mountainside. . . .

Now the dream took on a vaguely rational aspect; an ordered sequence came from the midst of the ridiculous chaos. Only intermittently now did the divine voice of Pym call strongly above the moaning wind.

"You'll hate my wife, Moore! You'll hate my wife! A body falling into that chasm is bound to be destroyed!"

"Yes, yes!" I yelled back hoarsely. "It's bound to be destroyed!"

"You'll hate my wife, Moore. . . ."

I looked down again at the woman I had been carrying. She lived, but was quite unconscious, a deep wound on her forehead from which blood flowed slowly. I realized that she was Pym's wife, that I had stunned her and brought her here. Yes, athwart my subconscious mind lay the recollection of how I had crept into the little Gothic bedroom where she and Pym had been peacefully sleeping.

It had been easy to take that heavy ebon stick of his from near the window, so clearly visible in the moonlight, and stun her before a single sound could escape her. Stealthily I had dragged her from the bed; Pym had continued sleeping. And now? The chasm, of course! It was quite near to me. I seemed somehow to be highly elated with the gruesomeness of my mission, a mission totally foreign to my normal nature.

Grimly I picked Betty Pym's limp body up in my arms, raised it over my head with unbelievable ease, then hurled it with all my strength into the eternal winds that rage and fume through that eight-hundred foot chasm. Immediately the body vanished, was lost to sight in the moonlight. I threw myself down on my face and stared down into the abyss. The wind stood my hair on end, whistled through my teeth. It was biting and cutting. Even on a summer night an elevation of some two thousand feet, clad only in a thin shirt and trousers—and brogues, of course—is no place to keep warm: I was chilled to the bone. Still, I had accomplished my purpose and that gave me a strange sense of complacency. Complacency for the implacable murder of a defenseless woman whom I hardly knew? What sort of a dream was this? It was endowed with a vicious and transcending realism, far more vivid than any dream before, and yet, I insisted to myself, still a dream. That being so, I realized, from all the observations on dream psychology, that I ought to become awake! The realization of a dream *being* a dream immediately causes sleep to cease—but in this instance I went on dreaming!

Puzzled, I rose up at last and turned to look toward the silver streak of Coniston Water, my only link with the hotel. I

moved forward, stumbled amidst the countless stones. I was shivering and shaking both with intense cold and reaction, reeling and sprawling with ever-widening circles into the maw of a dank and wholly inexplicable darkness. . . .

I AWOKE suddenly, in the oddest fashion, as though I had been forcibly thrown out of sleep into the waking world. The vague hangovers of that appalling nightmare were still upon me; relentless cold gripped my limbs despite the warmth of the little bedroom.

Shakingly I scrambled out of bed and connected the electric heater. By degrees, bathed in the radius of its warmth, I began to feel more comfortable; the spasmodic twitching of my limbs ceased, the paralyzing sense of terror abated. I sat there, my back against the foot of the bed, wrapped in a blanket, and gazed into the heart of the radiator's red-hot wires, trying to marshal some sense of order out of the chaos in my mind. Once I even got up again and examined my shirt, trousers and shoes. A vast relief swept over me at discovering they were exactly where I had left them; the shoes in particular were quite clean and bore no traces of the mud of the hillside, nor did the trouser turn-ups.

Satisfied, I crawled back into bed and slept again without dreaming, awaking with the dawn, a victim to the obvious manifestations of the common cold. I dressed and shaved moodily, sneezed an absurd number of times, and finally made my way down to breakfast.

Pym was already there, quietly eating bacon and eggs.

"You look tired, Moore," he commented, surveying me. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"I had a hell of a night," I answered briefly. "Must have been a cold coming on, I think. Awful dreams, too. You know!"

"Awful dreams?" he repeated in vague surprize. "How queer! Do you know, when I have a cold approaching I don't dream at all. I seem to be drugged, in a sort of utter stupor. What, for instance, did you dream about? Dreams always interest me."

I looked at him steadily. "I dreamt I stunned your wife with your heavy ebony walking-stick, and then murdered her by throwing her body from the top of Coniston Old Man into that chasm you pointed out last evening."

"My dear fellow, you *were* in a bad way! A walk this morning will clear you up a bit, perhaps."

"Incidentally," I said, an odd feeling in my heart, "where *is* your wife?"

"Oh, she went out for an early walk—she always does when on holiday. Good Lord, Moore, you're not thinking that dream of yours was real, surely?"

"It—it was so vivid!" I muttered. "Still, thank God I did only dream it!"

I began to eat, with this consolation in my mind, but did not proceed very far. I was in no humor for food. The events of the night had upset me. I was about to rise when a hand suddenly fell upon my shoulder. A voice, deep and strong, spoke.

"John Carlow Moore, I have a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Betty Pym. . . ."

I twisted round, my heart thudding violently, and met the cold gray eyes of a police inspector. Behind him in the doorway of the dining-room stood two constables. And Pym? He sat there, smiling grimly.

"Pym!" I gasped hoarsely; "what does this mean?"

"It means that my wife's body was found in Dow Crag chasm by me, early this morning. I went for a walk before dawn, unable to sleep and puzzled at the strange disappearance of my wife. I came upon her, horribly murdered! Naturally I immediately notified the police; they were at work while you slept after your inhuman butchery. In my room were found an old tie of yours, a button from the shirt you wore, and your fingerprints on my ebony walking-stick. It was a very simple matter to check them by your fingerprints on the bowl of your pipe up on the mantelpiece there. I persuaded the Inspector here that I could probably extract a confession from you, and I was more than successful. He and these two constables heard all you said just now—even though you did say it was a dream. A dream! My dear Moore!"

"But—but it *was* a dream!" I shouted huskily. "Damn it, you told me yourself that your wife was out walking——"

"Only to lead you on. I soon guessed that you were the culprit; you see, I remembered how you told me yesterday that you hated my wife!"

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words completely refused to form. My mind became a tumbling chaos of confused thoughts. Only certain things stood out like islands in my mental turmoil, and those were of being hustled from that dining-room and being thrust, God knows how long after, into jail.

Then, and only then, did my mind readjust itself to the stunning conditions about me. I employed the best defense my modest means would permit and prayed for a satisfactory result. Poor fool that I was!

3

ONCE, and only once, did Pym visit me. He was as smooth and collected as ever, his pale blue eyes shining brightly—but I knew him at last for the devil he really was. Yet I let him talk, and I listened. His voice was as beautiful as ever.

"I felt that I should make it clear to you, my dear Moore, that I owe you no personal grudge," he explained smoothly. "You have helped me wonderfully—proved the efficiency of the experiment I told you about. My experiment, you see, was to discover if a man could murder another without himself being anything but the mental agent behind it. It worked—admirably! My wife, you will perhaps have realized, was—shall we say?—prone to clandestine meetings with a man for whom I have an intense antipathy. I considered the problem very carefully from the moment I realized her unfaithfulness to me, and ultimately arrived at the conclusion that he was not nearly so much to blame as she. She was deceiving both him and me; therefore she was better exterminated. Do I make myself clear?"

"You make yourself clear as a cold-blooded incarnate devil!" I snapped back.

"Dear me, how very crude, Moore! However, perhaps you're right. I came to the Lake District to find there a laborer, or some farm man who would have done equally well as my tool; but it so happened you were present. So naturally I used you. Obviously my wife did not come of her own volition; I threatened what might happen to her if she did *not* come. Over the telephone, of course! All verbal, my dear sir."

"Go on!" I ground out.

"I hypnotized you, Moore—completely. You remember the glitter of the tea-things when I told you you would hate my wife? You remember the glare of the sun in your eyes when I told you that a body falling into Dow Crag chasm would be bound to be destroyed? You remember the heavy ebony stick I used to point out

the landmarks? There was the medium between! A complete sequence of events was hypnotically in your mind. The hatred for my wife, the weapon for attack, and the place for the body . . . . Last night you did everything I had commanded. I was not asleep when you stunned my wife. I followed you to the top of the mountain and back again, holding you under hypnotic control all the time. I saw what you did with my wife; I followed you back to the hotel. Needless to relate, I cleaned your shoes and rearranged your clothing to reassure your perhaps puzzled mind. . . . It was I too who provided the clues in my room that led to your arrest. . . . So very simple, you see."

"You'll not get away with it!" I vowed thickly. "I'll do all I can to bring you to book. . . ."

"As you will," he shrugged. "So far as I am concerned the world is rid of a very evil and designing woman. As for you, I am seeing to it that a good motive for your crime is supplied. You see, I am naming *you* as the 'other man.' Maybe a little unfair of me, but very necessary. . . . But my time is up, Mr. Moore. I will wish you good day, and"—he smiled twistedly—"good luck!"

Quietly he left the cell. . . .

NEED I dwell on the harrowing details of the events that ensued? I stood no earthly chance at the trial—Pym saw to that! All my efforts to prove the case one of hypnotic control failed completely. A matter-of-fact jury and judge were not impressed by my story of excursions into the mesmeric world; rather they regarded it as a deliberate fabrication to shield my guilt. Certainly I blackened my case by resorting to the truth. . . . As for Pym, he swore my soul away with a merciless implacability, aided by the extremely clever lawyer whom he had engaged.

Finally I was found guilty and sentenced to death—a penalty which I paid on the 9th of February, 1935, at eight a.m., and the details of which I have not the courage to comment upon. But of the events following my death I have a very clear recollection. . . .

I was buoyed up into the midst of a vast and embracing darkness, in which all concept of my other life and body vanished completely. I never saw any trace of my mortal body again. I appeared to be alone in a world of utter silence—utter physical silence, that is, yet filled with a thousand thoughts and conceptions which I could only assume were the mental radiations of the living people in the everyday world so utterly hidden from me.

There was no real conviction of loneliness, no feeling of horror—just that vast and all-pervading sensation of being the recipient of constant thoughts. Some were vague, some distinct; and at last I began to realize that these latter were connected with psychic and clairvoyant people. . . . In this wise I came to the clear and mediumistic abilities of Henry Clifton of London, and through him and his untiring patience I have succeeded in giving the story of my complete innocence in what became known later, so Clifton advises me, as the "Cumberland Horror."

But there are last words to add to this narration. I am dead? No! My body is dead, but my mind lives on, and in such capacity I have exacted revenge for the terrible thing that befell my earthly frame. Perhaps it was chance, or some instinctive mental gravitation, that caused me in my timeless wanderings to contact finally the mental vibrations of Enoch Pym himself.

His thoughts, his every mental facet, were bared to my extra-mundane perceptions. I gathered that he was in London, pursuing psychic and spiritualistic experi-

ments, arranging seances, indulging in hypnotism, and generally turning hallowed and cherished concepts into turmoils of diabolical villainy.

He had found my vanquishment so simple that he was planning his hypnotic efforts on a larger scale, overpowering leaders of commerce and finance with his fascinating personality and ruthless mind. I perceived in him a mass-murderer, and therein also beheld my duty—and my own vengeance!

For interminable periods I held his mind in bondage until the time came when I could strike. It came at one of his seances. I fought his hypnotic power with all the terrific energy of my free mind, until at last I felt the opposition snap like the breaking of a bough in the wind and the emptiness of my eternal wanderings was devoid of all disturbing influences. The mentality of Pym had gone, and yet he could not be dead surely, or I would have felt his presence in the after-life.

No, he was not dead. Clifton has told me that he became suddenly insane and babbles now about a man named John Carlow Moore and a murdered woman on top of a mountain. . . .

Truly, then, I am avenged. I have now a lasting and eternal peace, and if I am ever destined to assume a mortal form again I am in no hurry for it. I have drawn the portrait of a murderer and now I am free. . . . Free to move endlessly in these swarming currents of mental vibration.

Free — unsullied — gloriously alone. And yet . . . unafraid!

Mother of Serpents

By ROBERT BLOCH

A short but powerful tale about a Haitian president who disowned his mother, and the terrible curse uttered by a voodoo-woman

VOODOOISM is a queer thing. Forty years ago it was an unknown subject, save in certain esoteric circles. Today there is a surprizing amount of information about it, due to research —and an even more surprizing amount of misinformation.

Recent popular books on the subject are, for the most part, sheer romantic fancy; elaborated with the incomplete theorizings of ignoramuses.

Perhaps, though, this is for the best. For the truth about voodoo is such that no writer would care, or dare, to print it. Some of it is worse than their wildest fancies. I myself have seen certain things I do not care to discuss. It would be useless to tell people anyway, for they would not believe me. And once again, this may be for the best. Knowledge can be a thousand times more terrifying than ignorance.

I know, though, for I have lived in Haiti, the dark island. I have learned much from legendry, stumbled on many things through accident, and the bulk of my knowledge comes from the one really authentic source—the statements of the blacks. They're not talkative people, as a rule, those old natives of the back-hill country. It took patience and long familiarity with them before they unbent and told me their secrets.

That's why so many of the travel books are so palpably false—no writer who visits Haiti for six months or a year could possibly ingratiate himself into the confidence of those who know the facts. There are so few who really do know; so few who are not afraid to tell.

But I have learned. Let me tell you of the olden days; the old times, when Haiti rose to an empire, borne on a wave of blood.

I

It was many years ago, soon after the slaves had revolted. Toussaint l'Ouverture, Dessalines and King Christophe freed them from their French masters, freed them after uprisings and massacres and set up a kingdom founded on cruelty more fantastic than the despotism that reigned before.

There were no happy blacks in Haiti then. They had known too much of torture and death; the carefree life of their West Indian neighbors was utterly alien to these slaves and descendants of slaves. A strange mixture of races flourished: fierce tribesmen from Ashanti, Damballah, and the Guinea Coast; sullen Caribs; dusky offspring of renegade Frenchmen; bastard admixtures of Spanish, Negro, and Indian blood. Sly, treacherous half-breeds and mulattos ruled the coast, but there were even worse dwellers in the hills behind.

There were jungles in Haiti, impassable jungles, mountain-ringed and swamp-scourged forests filled with poisonous insects and pestilential fevers. White men dared not enter them, for they were worse than death. Blood-sucking plants, venomous reptiles, diseased orchids filled the forests, forests that hid horrors Africa had never known.

For that is where the real voodoo flourished, back there in the hills. Men lived there, it is said, descendants of escaped slaves, and outlaw factions that had been hunted from the coast. Furtive rumors told of isolated villages that practised cannibalism, mixed in with dark religious rites more dreadful and perverted than anything spawned in the Congo itself. Necrophilism, phallic worship, anthropomancy, and distorted versions of the Black Mass were commonplace. The shadow of *obeah* was everywhere. Human sacrifice was common, the offering up of roosters and goats an accepted thing. There were orgies around the voodoo altars, and blood was drunk in honor of *Baron Samede* and the old black gods brought from ancient lands.

Everybody knew about it. Each night the *ratta*-drums boomed out from the hills, and fires flared over the forests. Many known *papalois* and conjure-doctors resided on the edge of the coast itself, but they were never disturbed. Nearly all the "civilized" blacks still believe in charms and philtres; even the church-goers reverted to talismans and incantations in time of need. So-called "educated" Negroes in Port-au-Prince society were admittedly emissaries from the barbarian tribes of the interior, and despite the outward show of civilization the bloody priests still ruled behind the throne.

Of course there were scandals, mysterious disappearances, and occasional protests from emancipated citizens. But it

was not wise to meddle with those who bowed to the Black Mother, or incur the anger of the terrible old men who dwelt in the shadow of the Snake.

Such was the status of sorcery when Haiti became a republic. People often wonder why there is still sorcery existent there today; more secretive, perhaps, but still surviving. They ask why the ghastly *zombies* are not destroyed, and why the Government has not stepped in to stamp out the fiendish blood-cults that still lurk in the jungle gloom.

Perchance this tale will provide an answer; this old, secret tale of the new republic. Officials, remembering the story, are still afraid to interfere too strongly, and the laws that have been passed are very loosely enforced.

Because the Serpent Cult of Obeah will never die in Haiti—in Haiti, that fantastic island whose sinuous shoreline resembles the yawning jaws of a monstrous *snake*.

2

ONE of the earliest presidents of Haiti was an educated man. Although born on the island, he was schooled in France, and studied extensively while abroad. His accession to the highest office of the land found him an enlightened, sophisticated cosmopolite of the modern type. Of course he still liked to remove his shoes in the privacy of his office, but he never displayed his naked toes in an official capacity. Don't misunderstand—the man was no Emperor Jones; he was merely a polished ebon gentleman whose natural barbarity occasionally broke through its veneer of civilization.

He was, in fact, a very shrewd man. He had to be in order to become president in those early days; only extremely shrewd men ever attained that dignity. Perhaps it would enlighten you a bit to say that in those times the term "shrewd" was a polite Haitian synonym for "crooked." It is therefore easy to realize the president's character when you know that he was regarded as one of the most successful politicians the republic ever produced.

In his short reign he was opposed by very few enemies; and those that did work against him usually disappeared. The tall, coal-black man with the physical skull-conformation of a gorilla harbored a remarkably crafty brain beneath his beetling brow.

His ability was phenomenal. He had an insight into finance which profited him greatly; profited him, that is, in both his official and unofficial capacity. Whenever he saw fit to increase the taxes he increased the army as well, and sent it out to escort the state tax-collectors. His treaties with foreign countries were masterpieces of legal lawlessness. This black Machiavelli knew that he must work fast, since presidents had a peculiar way of dying in Haiti. They seemed peculiarly susceptible to disease—"lead poisoning," as our modern gangster friends might say. So the president worked very fast indeed, and he did a masterful job.

This was truly remarkable, in view of his humble background. For his was a success saga in the good old Horatio Alger manner. His father was unknown. His mother was a conjure-woman in the hills, and though quite well known, she had been very poor. The president had been born in a log cabin; quite the classic setting for a future distinguished career. His early years had been most uneventful, until his adoption, at thirteen, by a benevolent Protestant minister. For a year he lived with this kind man, serving as house-boy in his home. Suddenly the poor minister died of an obscure ailment; this

was most unfortunate, for he had been quite wealthy and his money was alleviating much of the suffering in this particular section. At any rate, this rich minister died, and the poor conjure-woman's son sailed to France for a university education.

As for the conjure-woman, she bought herself a new mule and said nothing. Her skill at herbs had given her son a chance in the world, and she was satisfied.

It was eight years before the boy returned. He had changed a great deal since his departure; he preferred the society of whites and the octoroon society people of Port-au-Prince. It is recorded that he rather ignored his old mother, too. His newly acquired fastidiousness made him painfully aware of the woman's ignorant simplicity. Besides, he was ambitious, and he did not care to publicize his relationship with such a notorious witch.

For she was quite famous in her way. Where she had come from and what her original history was, nobody knew. But for many years her hut in the mountains had been the rendezvous of strange worshippers and even stranger emissaries. The dark powers of *obeah* were evoked in her shadowy altar-place amidst the hills, and a furtive group of acolytes resided there with her. Her ritual fires always flared on moonless nights, and bullocks were given in bloody baptism to the Crawler of Midnight. For she was a Priestess of the Serpent.

The Snake-God, you know, is the real deity of the *obeah* cults. The blacks worshipped the Serpent in Dahomey and Senegal from time immemorial. They venerate the reptiles in a curious way, and there is some obscure linkage between the Snake and the crescent moon. Curious, isn't it—this serpent superstition? The Garden of Eden had its tempter, you know, and the Bible tells of Moses and his staff of snakes. The Egyptians revered Set, and the ancient Hindoos had a cobra god. It seems to be general throughout the world—the kindred hatred and reverence of serpents. Always they seem to be worshipped as creatures of evil. Our own American Indians believed in Yig, and Aztec myths follow the pattern. And of course the Hopi ceremonial dances are on the same order.

But the African Serpent legends are particularly dreadful, and the Haitian adaptations of the sacrificial rites are worse.

At the time of which I speak some of the voodoo groups were believed to actually breed snakes; they smuggled the reptiles over from the Ivory Coast to use in their secret practices. There were tall tales current about twenty-foot pythons which swallowed infants offered up to them on the Black Altar, and about *sendings* of poisonous serpents which killed enemies of the voodoo-masters. It is a known fact that several anthropoid apes had been smuggled into the country by a peculiar cult that worshipped gorillas; so the serpent legends may have been equally true.

At any rate, the president's mother was a priestess, and equally as famous, in a way, as her distinguished son. He, just after his return, had slowly climbed to power. First he had been a tax-gatherer, then treasurer, and finally president. Several of his rivals died, and those who opposed him soon found it expedient to dissemble their hatred; for he was still a savage at heart, and savages like to torment their enemies. It was rumored that he had constructed a secret torture-chamber beneath the palace, and that its instruments were rusty, though not from disuse.

The breach between the young states-

man and his mother began to widen just prior to his presidential incumbency. The immediate cause was his marriage to the daughter of a rich octoroon planter from the coast. Not only was the old woman humiliated because her son contaminated the family stock (she was pure Negro, and descendant of a Niger slave-king), but she was further indignant because she had not been invited to the wedding.

It was held in Port-au-Prince. The foreign consuls were there, and the cream of Haitian society was present. The lovely bride had been convent-bred, and her antecedents were held in the highest esteem. The groom wisely did not deign to desecrate the nuptial celebration by including his rather unsavory parent.

She came, though, and watched the affair through the kitchen entranceway. It was just as well that she did not make her presence known, as it would have embarrassed not only her son, but several others as well—official dignitaries who sometimes consulted her in their unofficial capacity.

What she saw of her son and his bride was not pleasing. The man was an affected dandy now, and his wife was a silly flirt. The atmosphere of pomp and ostentation did not impress her; behind their debonair masks of polite sophistication she knew that most of those present were superstitious Negroes who would run to her for charms or oracular advice the moment they were in trouble. Nevertheless, she took no action; she merely smiled rather bitterly and hobbled home. After all, she still loved her son.

The next affront, however, she could not overlook. This was the inauguration of the new president. She was not invited to this affair either, yet she came. And this time she did not skulk in the shadows. After the oath of office was administered she marched boldly up to the new ruler of Haiti and accosted him before the very eyes of the German consul himself. She was a grotesque figure; an ungainly little harridan barely five feet tall, black, barefooted, and clad in rags.

Her son quite naturally ignored her presence. The withered crone licked her toothless gums in terrible silence. Then, quite calmly, she began to curse him—not in French, but in native *patois* of the hills. She called down the wrath of her bloody gods upon his ungrateful head, and threatened both him and his wife with vengeance for their smug ingratitude. The assembled guests were shocked.

So was the new president. However, he did not forget himself. Calmly he motioned to his guards, who led the now hysterical witch-woman away. He would deal with her later.

The next night when he saw fit to go into the dungeon and reason with his mother, she was gone. Disappeared, the guards told him, rolling their eyes mysteriously. He had the jailer shot, and went back to his official chambers.

He was a little worried about that curse business. You see, he knew what the woman was capable of. He did not like those threats against his wife, either. The next day he had some silver bullets molded, like King Henry in the old days. He also bought an *ouanga* charm from a devil-doctor of his own acquaintance. Magic would fight magic.

That night a serpent came to him in dreams; a serpent with green eyes that whispered in the way of men and hissed at him with shrill and mocking laughter as he struck at it in his sleep. There was a reptilian odor in his bedroom the next morning, and a nauseous slime upon his pillow that gave forth a similar stench. And the president knew that only his charm had saved him.

That afternoon his wife missed one of

her Paris frocks, and the president questioned his servants in his private torture-chamber below. He learned some facts he dared not tell his bride, and thereafter he seemed very sad. He had seen his mother work with wax images before—little mannikins resembling men and women, dressed in parts of their stolen garments. Sometimes she stuck pins into them or roasted them over a slow fire. Always the real people sickened and died. This knowledge made the president quite unhappy, and he was still more overwrought when messengers returned and said that his mother was gone from her old hut in the hills.

THREE days later his wife died, of a painful wound in her side which no doctor could explain. She was in agony until the end, and just before her passing it was rumored that her body turned blue and bloated up to twice its normal size. Her features were eaten away as if with leprosy, and her swollen limbs looked like those of an elephantiasis victim. Loathsome tropical diseases abound in Haiti, but none of them kill in three days. . . .

After this the president went mad.

Like Cotton Mather of old, he started on a witch-hunting crusade. Soldiers and police were sent out to comb the countryside. Spies rode up to hovels on the mountain-peaks, and armed patrols crouched in far-off fields where the living dead-men work, their glazed and glassy eyes staring ceaselessly at the moon. *Mamalois* were put to the question over slow fires, and possessors of forbidden books were roasted over flames fed by the very tomes they harbored. Bloodhounds yammered in the hills, and priests died on altars where they were wont to sacrifice. Only one order had been specially given: the president's mother was to be captured alive and unharmed.

Meanwhile he sat in the palace with the embers of slow insanity in his eyes—embers that flared into fiendish flame when the guards brought in the withered crone, who had been captured near that awful grove of idols in the swamp.

They took her downstairs, although she fought and clawed like a wildcat, and then the guards went away and left her son with her alone. Alone, in a torture-chamber, with a mother who cursed him from the rack. Alone, with frantic fires in his eyes, and a great silver knife in his hand. . . .

The president spent many hours in his secret torture-chamber during the next few days. He seldom was seen around the palace, and his servants were given orders that he must not be disturbed. On the fourth day he came up the hidden stairway for the last time, and the flickering madness in his eyes was gone.

Just what occurred in the dungeon below will never be rightly known. No doubt that is for the best. The president was a savage at heart, and to the brute, prolongation of pain always brings ecstasy. . . .

It is recorded, though, that the old witch-woman cursed her son with the Serpent's Curse in her dying breath, and that is the most terrible curse of all.

Some idea of what happened may be gained by the knowledge of the president's revenge; for he had a grim sense of humor, and a barbarian's idea of retribution. His wife had been killed by his mother, who fashioned a waxen image. He decided to do what would be exquisitely appropriate.

When he came up the stairs that last time, his servants saw that he bore with him a great candle, fashioned of corpse-fat. And since nobody ever saw his mother's body again, there were curious

surmises as to where the corpse-fat was obtained. But then, the president's mind leaned toward grisly jests. . . .

The rest of the story is very simple. The president went directly to his chambers in the palace, where he placed the candle in a holder on his desk. He had neglected his work in the last few days, and there was much official business for him to transact. For a while he sat in silence, staring at the candle with a curious, satisfied smile. Then he called for his papers and announced that he would attend to them immediately.

He worked all that night, with two guards stationed outside his door. Sitting at his desk, he pored over his task in the candle-light—the candle-light from the corpse-fat taper.

Evidently his mother's dying curse did not bother him at all. Once satisfied, his blood-lust abated, he discounted all possibility of revenge. Even he was not superstitious enough to believe that the sorceress could return from her grave. He was quite calm as he sat there, quite the civilized gentleman. The candle cast ominous shadows over the darkened room, but he did not notice—until it was too late. Then he looked up to see the corpse-fat candle wriggle into a monstrous life.

His mother's curse. . . .

The candle—the corpse-fat candle—was *alive!* It was a sinuous, twisting thing, weaving in its holder with sinister purpose.

The flame-tipped end seemed to glow strongly into a sudden terrible semblance. The president, amazed, saw a fiery face—his mother's; a tiny, wrinkled face of flame, with a corpse-fat body that darted out toward the man with hideous ease. The candle was lengthening as if the tallow were melting; lengthening, and reaching out toward him in a terrible way.

The president of Haiti screamed, but it was too late. The glowing flame on the end snuffed out, breaking the hypnotic spell that had held the man betranced. And at that moment the candle leapt, while the room faded into dreadful darkness. It was a ghastly darkness, filled with moans, and the sound of a thrashing body that grew fainter, and fainter. . . .

It was quite still by the time the guards had entered and turned up the lights once more. They knew about the corpse-fat candle and the witch-mother's curse. That is why they were the first to announce the president's death; the first to fire a bullet into his temple and claim he committed suicide.

They told the president's successor the story, and he gave orders that the crusade against voodoo be abandoned. It was better so, for the new man did not wish to die. The guards had explained why they shot the president and called it suicide, and his successor did not wish to risk the Serpent Curse.

For the president of Haiti had been strangled to death by his mother's corpse-fat candle—*a corpse-fat candle that was wound around his neck like a giant snake.*

The Cyclops of Xoatl

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE and E. HOFFMANN PRICE

What was the weird monster that spread death and panic terror over a peaceful Mexican countryside?—a grim tale of a gruesome horror

AS BART LESLIE nosed his dust-coated, twelve-cylinder roadster across the railroad tracks, his rugged face expanded in a good-humored grin at the grotesque fancy of the founders of that excrescence that was marked on the maps of northern Mexico as Xoatl. They had named the main street Avenida de las Palmas; but in lieu of palms, it was lined with thick-walled adobe houses as alike in their squat, squarish ugliness as monstrous dice cast into the desert by some giant gamester. One heap, however, broke the monotony as well as the darkness of Avenida de las Palmas. It was two stories high, and a second-floor gallery overhung the street. Bart Leslie braked his car to a halt just short of the patch of light that blazed from the arched entrance, slid from the wheel behind which he had been cramped for something like fourteen hours, and stretched the kinks from his lean, rangy body.

Leslie—better known along the Rio Grande as Two-Gun Bart, formerly of the Border Patrol—was in enemy territory. Arturo Hernandez's urgent message spoke for itself—but Leslie, true to form, made no attempt to conceal his presence. After an unobtrusive but all-seeing glance of his gray eyes, he stepped into the smoke-fogged, kerosene-illuminated tap room of the tavern. That swift scrutiny sufficed to assure him that among the loungers who had regarded his entry with curiosity there was one whose interest was intense and personal; and as Leslie addressed the bartender in intentionally halting Spanish, he watched the fly-specked mirrors of the back bar.

"I am waiting for Don Arturo of Hacienda de la Plata," he announced. "If he should call, be pleased to tell him that I will be in that last booth. Over there, in the corner. And in the meanwhile, get me a plate of *tacos* and a cold beer."

The scarcely perceptible change in the expression of the sharp-faced, swarthy fellow who had been watching him convinced Leslie that the contents of his telegram to Hernandez had been fairly well circulated about Xoatl; and this hinted that the one-eyed cannibal who was terrorizing the peons of Don Arturo's hacienda in the foothills of the Xoatl Mountains had human allies, despite the current reports of his satanic origin.

Leslie picked his way among the tables, parted the greasy blue curtains that screened the booths reserved for patrons who dropped in from the adjoining dance hall, and planted himself on the bare wooden bench that paralleled either wall of the cubicle. He could thus continue his scrutiny of the hangers-on.

THE *tacos* were excellent, and the beer was better. Leslie tossed the waiter a silver peso, and declined his change.

"Gracias, señor!" Then, gesturing toward the door that opened from the booth into the alley between the tavern and the dance hall, the waiter proposed,

"Perhaps your excellency would like company, yes? Very beautiful girls. And most amiable, *señor*."

He twisted his mustache, beamed, and made an ecstatic grimace that left little doubt as to the amiability of the ladies who would be most delighted to forsake the dance hall; but Leslie yawned prodigiously, cocked his feet on the opposite bench, and said, "Hell, no! I'm so tired I could sleep standing up! Now beat it—but don't forget to tell Don Arturo I'm here."

Another mighty yawn. The *mozo* could see with one eye that Leslie's bronzed face was dust-caked and weary. He pocketed the change, bowed, and solicitously drew the curtains so that the chatter of the loungers would be less disturbing. He and others, however, would have been amazed at Leslie's ensuing alertness and humorous grin. Leslie's view of the tap room had been shut off, and he did not wish to break the illusion; so he drew a heavy-bladed jack-knife and with a few deft jabs pierced the front

"Leslie halted at the tip of the opening, and grimaced wryly at the charnel stench that filtered from the gloom."

wall of the booth. And as he washed the *tacos* down with the excellent beer, he maintained keen observation through his improvised loophole. Leslie rolled a cigarette, slouched into the angle of the cubicle and relaxed for a cat-nap, but despite his seeming torpor, the suggestion of a smile twitched at the corners of his broad mouth. The man who had been watching him had just vanished into the darkness of Avenida de las Palmas.

"Monkey Face," said Leslie to himself as he hitched his single-action, frontier-model .45's into position for a fast draw, "is too damn' obvious to be interesting."

Whereat Leslie renewed his pondering on Don Arturo's alarming letter. But finally his chin sagged down to his chest, and the cigarette stump dropped from his relaxed fingers. Floorboarding it from Bonita, north of the Rio Grande, all the way to Xoatl was more than a man's task for one day. Presently Leslie was asleep; but he was not entirely oblivious of the gentle draft of cool air that began to filter in from his left. He lifted one eyelid, and noticed that the door of the booth was very slowly swinging outward. He emitted a subdued snore, and waited. But though he had not changed his posture Leslie's body had become tense and ready for action.

Through his eyelashes, Leslie recognized Monkey Face, and caught the chilly gleam of a broad-bladed machete. It was all to be discreet and quiet. A machete parts head and shoulders so swiftly that the victim has no chance to emit even one dying gasp.

Monkey Face had paused to make sure of things. He listened for a moment, noted Leslie's folded arms and the distance to the butts of his revolvers. Despite Leslie's seemingly conveniently averted head, the narrow confines of the booth and the need for stealth necessitated nice work for a decapitating stroke. Monkey Face noiselessly crossed the threshold, poised himself—and then things opened up in Xoatl.

As the glittering, two-foot shard of steel lashed out, Leslie's tense muscles exploded in a lunge that catapulted him headlong at his assailant and well inside his guard. The machete sizzled through air instead of an averted neck. Monkey Face howled with pain. Steel clattered to the floor, wrenched from his numbed fingers by Leslie's grip; and simultaneously there was a sharp, smacking report—not a pistol shot, but Two-Gun Bart's fist hammering home like the kick of a mule. Monkey Face pitched back in a graceful arc and landed like a bag of meal in the patch of light that filtered from the open door into the alley.

There were other cries, and a shuffle of scurrying bare feet. From the tap room came a confused muttering and the scrape of chairs. Leslie whirled as the blue curtains jerked aside. A .45 had blossomed in each hand; but it was not the mass attack he had expected.

A tall, handsome Mexican, resplendent in purple velvet that glittered with silver braid and buttons the size of tea-cups, extended a powerful hand as he exclaimed, "Don Bart! *Por amor de Dios,* what is it?"

LESLIE holstered his revolvers, chuckled amiably, and accepted the extended hand.

"Don't ask me, Don Arturo. I didn't ask that machete artist." He indicated the groaning Monkey Face who had recovered sufficiently from a long count to struggle to his knees. "And he didn't take time to explain."

Don Arturo cursed with Latin vigor, jerked a pistol from his gaudy sash. Leslie's hand flashed out as the weapon spurted flame. The shot missed; but it hastened Monkey Face's recovery. He

howled as he scrambled to his feet and bounded into the darkness.

"W'at those hell, my fran'?" demanded Don Arturo, outraged at Leslie's unexpected gesture. "I weel keel him——"

"Aw, nuts!" laughed Leslie. "I could have killed him myself, but I cold-calked him instead, so he'd go back to his boss and tell him that a sleeping man took his machete away from him and knocked him for a row. The moral effect, what?"

"Son of wan gun! That ees good," admitted Don Arturo. Then he somberly shook his head, twisted his black mustache to an even finer point, and said, "But I am afraid you 'ave been make conspicuous already. I did my best to impress you weeth—how should I say?—weeth the peril—you should not have wire' me. That advertise your mission."

"The worst peril about this country," laughed Leslie, "is the danger of dying of thirst. Let's have a drink while you tell me about the large doings you promised in your letter. But unless it's more exciting than bandits, I'm going back to Bonita. I'm busy as a one-armed paper-hanger——"

"You weel be busier as a two-armed paper-hanger! Listen, *amigo*——" Then he remembered the obligations of hospitality, called for Leslie's favorite, a Bacardi cocktail, and resumed, "I weel explain. I 'ave buy the Hacienda de la Plata from Romualdo Pacheco. Wan grand bargain. Very cheap. But before I move out there more than three months, I find the nigger in the woods. No wonder that Pacheco offered me the bargain. That accursed hacienda is haunted by a devil. A cannibal. He 'ave keel three men and drink their blood. My peons are leaving. I cannot work the property. It is a total loss, but if I abandon it, I am what you call busted! Clean' out."

"Hmmm . . . well, so I gathered from your letter, but frankly, it didn't make any too much sense," said Leslie as the *mozo* set glasses and a well-frosted shaker on the table. "Now, this cannibal stuff——"

"I 'ave not seen him," admitted Don Arturo. "But the peons say he is fully eleven feet tall. I would not believe them, but those footprints—they are bigger as a suitcase. But that is not the worst. Listen—that devil has one big blazing eye in the middle of his forehead. It is——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Leslie, "this is getting too strong. Eleven feet tall, one over-sized eye, and he's been ganging up on the hired help and eating them?"

"Seguramente," affirmed Don Arturo. "Several 'ave disappear'. But two we found. The throat bitten out. The blood all drunk. If that is not Satanás at work, what is it?"

He piously crossed himself and unceremoniously gulped his drink. Leslie frowned as he sampled the Bacardi. Don Arturo was a fighter. Revolutionists, bandits, or agrarians, the pests of northern Mexico, looked all alike to him. If Don Arturo was getting shaky, something sinister and evil must have taken possession of the hacienda. On the other hand, the reception committee that had lost so little time in waiting on Leslie had certainly given little evidence of satanic origin.

"When do we head out for your hacienda?" wondered Leslie as he set down his empty glass. "The more I think of it, the more it looks as though this will be interesting."

"We leave at midnight. It is a long march."

"Nothing doing," protested Leslie. "I've been blistering the road for the past fourteen hours and I'd prefer to grab some sleep before I start interviewing cannibals. Let your men return with the

horses. You and I will drive out in my car."

"That is wan excellent idea," agreed Don Arturo. "But I think it would be dangerous. Already there has been one attempt to murder you."

"I'll chance that," was Leslie's careless reply. "And come to think of it, *tacos* and beer isn't a square meal. I could do pretty well with some chicken and chile. And in the meanwhile you might as well have them fix us up with sleeping-quarters and drag my luggage out of the car."

2

DON ARTURO summoned the proprietor, handed him Leslie's keys, and issued the necessary orders. Despite the weeks that had made the Mexican's dark eyes haggard and worried, Don Arturo brightened up at Leslie's hearty appreciation of the blistering native cookery and caught a touch of his free and easy approach to the sinister riddle of the hacienda; and as the platters were finally cleaned down to the last drop of savory gravy, Don Arturo called for coffee, and slid cigars across the greasy table.

Leslie, however, had not forgotten the assassin he had thwarted. And thus, throughout the meal, he had contrived to peep through the loophole he had cut into the wall of the booth. Neither Don Arturo nor the waiter had noticed that unobtrusive, sharp-eyed scrutiny; and thus both were amazed when Leslie, after tasting a spoonful of the steaming beverage, smiled oddly and said, "I'm as tired as hell. Bring this coffee up to my room —come on, Arturo!"

Hernandez was perplexed, but the *mozo* grinned, picked up the tray, and led the way to the second floor, where rooms had been prepared. But before he could leave, Leslie detained him.

"Just a second here, boy! Is this fresh coffee, made to our order, as Don Arturo demanded?"

The waiter's eyes widened. For an instant he seemed embarrassed; then he assured, "*Si, señor!* I prepared it myself. With my own hands. Indeed, it is absolutely fresh. But yes, of course."

"Hmmmm. . . . I thought so. . . ." He spoke very quietly, but his eyes narrowed to wrathful, blazing, steel-gray slits. The waiter squirmed and fidgeted during the interminable scrutiny. Then Leslie commanded, "All right, drink mine. Every damn' drop of it!"

"But, *señor*——"

"Drink it!" reiterated Leslie. The muzzle of his .45 was pointed straight at the waiter's stomach. "Right now. Before I blow your guts around your backbone."

The waiter was perspiring profusely, despite the chill of the night. His trembling hand reached for the cup.

"And don't drop it," warned Leslie, "or I'll drop you. Bottoms up!"

He obeyed. And then Leslie, still covering the waiter with his Colt, sampled Don Arturo's coffee.

"That's all okey," he declared. "I'm beginning to figure that I'll have a pleasant visit at your hacienda, Don Arturo."

The Mexican cursed in a low, wrathful voice, drew his pistol, and said, "*Por Dios,* I will keel this peeg! It is an outrage to my hospitality."

He leveled the weapon. The waiter voiced an incoherent, terrified protest. And then Don Arturo smiled thinly, lowered the pistol, and said, "No. On second thought, I will wait. I will be sure, first."

That was reasonable enough, Leslie conceded, for though he was convinced that the coffee had been drugged, he could not be certain until sufficient time had elapsed to prove his contention.

They did not wait long. At the end of twenty minutes, the waiter had

slumped into a chair; and presently the opiate had completely overcome him. Don Arturo twisted his mustache and said with a grim smile, "Now I weel play the joke. Let us put this excellent fellow to sleep in your bed. And you, my fran', weel do me the honor of sharing my room. You need the rest. I will stand guard until morning."

"Go ahead," said Leslie. "But if I wasn't so damn' sleepy, I'd sit up myself to watch for the flabbergasted look on the face of the bird that figures he'll slip into my room with a machete."

He followed Arturo to the adjoining room, kicked off his boots, and in a moment was sound asleep.

Leslie's sleep, however, was not interrupted in the way he had expected. Instead of a crackle of pistol fire and Hernandez's wrathful voice, he heard a horrible, gurgling scream that was cut short before it had fairly penetrated his consciousness. He bounded to his feet, revolvers in hand. In the darkness he collided with Hernandez. An instant later a tongue of light pierced the gloom.

"Watch it!" warned Leslie, catching his friend by the shoulder.

But the hall was empty. They heard a stirring and a thrashing in the adjoining room, and then silence. Valdez, the proprietor, came bounding up the stairs with a lantern. The rooms at the farther end of the hall disgorged a handful of guests.

"In here," said Don Arturo, indicating the room which his ally was to have occupied.

"Madre de Dios!" groaned Valdez. "They have killed him——"

"Like hell they have!" interrupted Leslie, crossing the threshold.

He tried the door. He had left it unlocked; but now it was barred. Leslie retreated a pace, hurled himself at the barrier. It groaned at the impact of his shoulder. Leslie recovered, and again flung himself forward. Wood splintered, and the bolt tore loose from its socket.

Guided by the flashlight he had given Hernandez, Leslie entered the room. It was empty save for a man lying on the bed.

"Good God!" muttered Leslie. "Look at his throat!"

He saw now why that horrified yell had been so suddenly cut short. And Leslie also knew what Hernandez had had in mind in proposing the substitution of the unconscious waiter for the intended victim. He chuckled grimly, and turned toward his friend with an approving nod; and he was amazed to note Don Arturo's pallor.

That mangled, torn throat was a ghastly spectacle, but the Mexican had a strong stomach. Leslie wondered for a moment at Hernandez's horrified expression.

"Look! I tell you, *look!* That one-eyed cannibal—that devil has followed me to Xoatl—that ees exactly how he kills my peons—tears their throat—*Maria Madre!* We are not hunting him. *He is hunting you.* And now he has vanished—like smoke."

But Leslie shook his head.

"He could have escaped through that window that opens into the court. And it's a pretty low-class devil that has to bribe a waiter to drug me so I'll be easy meat."

THE proprietor was crossing himself with almost as much vigor as Don Arturo. Leslie glanced at his watch.

"I've had a pretty good snooze," he said. "Let's head out for the hacienda before the one-eyed devil discovers his mistake."

As Bart Leslie was drawing on his boots, there was a tap at the door.

"Let 'em in," said Leslie. "I don't think we'll have any more assassins tonight."

A man with blond, bristling hair, blue eyes that peered owlishly from horn-rimmed spectacles, and a woolen bathrobe drawn about his tall, burly body was at the door. He bowed with military precision and announced with a barely perceptible Teutonic accent, "I am Doctor Johann Ludwig Blauvelt. I witnessed the aftermath of this deplorable occurrence."

"Come in, Doctor," invited Leslie. "But you're too late to help that poor devil."

"I am not a surgeon but a doctor of philosophy," explained Blauvelt. "And I trust that you will pardon the liberty I take in intruding. Earlier in the evening, I was sitting in the booth adjoining yours. I could scarcely avoid overhearing your remarks concerning the monster that is terrorizing the hacienda of ——"

"Arturo Jésus Esteban Hernandez y Casablanca, *señor,*" announced Leslie's friend. "And you are right. It is no less than Satan himself trying to drive me from my property."

"All of which," wondered Leslie, "is apropos of what?"

"Just this, gentlemen," explained Doctor Blauvelt. "I have spent the past year in Mexico, engaged in field work, mainly archeological and anthropological. I would be very grateful for an opportunity to make some observations about your hacienda. I would be too glad to share, in the interests of science, the dangers which you gentlemen were discussing."

"But certainly, *señor!* Perhaps with the aid of science we will all the sooner hunt down this one-eyed monster," assured Don Arturo. Then, to Leslie: "My fran', you do not object?"

"Hell's fire, no!" said Leslie. "The more, the merrier. Just shake it up, Doctor, and pack your baggage. We're about ready to ride."

Blauvelt expressed his thanks, and hastened to his room. Don Arturo quizzically regarded Leslie.

"Science weel perhaps help," he murmured, "but me, I put more faith in those two guns which you wear so gracefully. But what do you say?"

Leslie shrugged, grinned, and rolled a cigarette.

"He'll probably be a bit of a pest," he replied carelessly, "but I don't think he'll hamper us. Unless I'm mistaken, he'll damn' soon confine his efforts to butterfly-chasing."

They carried Leslie's luggage to the car. Blauvelt presently joined them with his traveling-kit; and with Leslie at the wheel, they set out into the chilly darkness toward the Xoatl range. Hernandez lapsed into a brown, moody silence, but Blauvelt maintained a running fire of ponderously learned discourse.

"It is my opinion," he concluded, rounding out an elaborate theory, "that this is another outcropping of native superstition. I am certain that my contention will be verified."

Leslie held his own counsel. He had heard similar discourses, and had seen them startlingly refuted; and while Leslie did not go so far as admitting the supernatural, he had often seen enough science take the short end of the deal to regard it as skeptically as he did outright superstition. Yet he did not anticipate the ghastly refutation that awaited Blauvelt's claims when they arrived at the hacienda, shortly after daybreak.

As they cleared a clump of cottonwoods, just beyond which Leslie could distinguish the square, squat adobe shacks of the peons, he heard a yell of terror, the report of a rifle, and the whine of a ricochet bullet.

"Pedro, you jackass!" roared Hernandez, leaping clear of the running-board.

A peon, rifle at the ready, emerged from the door of the nearest adobe.

"Cristo del Grao!" he exclaimed in dismay, recognizing his master's voice. "Thank God—Don Arturo! I thought it was the devil coming back again. Look!"

He gestured toward the roadster. Leslie laughed as he caught the point. One of the headlights was out; and the car, zooming up to the crest of a steep rise in the road, had given Pedro the illusion of a blazing eye staring down from a considerable height. The peon's incoherent remarks confirmed his guess.

"He was here again, tonight," concluded Pedro. *"Madre de Dios!* We are lost! There is no hope. He killed José. Come. I will show you."

The frantic population of the adobe shacks emerged from shelter. Blauvelt joined the group, and followed Pedro, the foreman, to the house where they had placed the body of their hapless comrade.

The dead man's face was a mask of helpless terror. His throat was hideously lacerated; but scarcely a drop of blood had been splashed to his chest, despite the torn jugular and arteries. As the light strengthened, Leslie saw that the body had been drained of blood, and that the ghastly wound gave evidence of suction applied to extract the vital fluid. He shook his head perplexedly as he regarded the gruesome evidence that confirmed Don Arturo's story; then he turned to Blauvelt, who was solemnly scrutinizing the body.

"Well, Doctor, how do you like that for an ignorant peon's hallucination?"

Blauvelt shrugged and imperturbably replied, "This still does not prove that the monster *is* supernatural. If you will glance about, Mr. Leslie, you will see ample confirmation of my contention. And now that the light is stronger, it will be plain enough."

He led the way to the door, crossed the hard surface of the drive, and indicated a dusty patch that lay on the farther side.

"I noticed it by the glow of the headlight," he explained.

"Holy smoke!" muttered Leslie, regarding the monstrous print. It bore only a distorted similarity to a human foot; but the heel was unmistakable, and the toes, six in number, left no doubt that the monster must be at least approximately anthropoid. The length of stride indicated prodigious stature.

"By heaven," muttered Leslie, "he must be eleven feet tall if he's an inch!" Then, to Pedro, "How did it happen? And when?"

"How should I know, *señor?*" countered the swarthy peon. "I heard a noise, then a terrible cry—just like the last time. I did not look out for a long time. I was frightened. Then I heard another noise, and saw it running into the darkness. But when—how can I say?"

And that settled it. Leslie knew that no peon has more than a vague conception of time. Blauvelt, however, solved the difficulty as they returned to the adobe for another look at the corpse.

"Rigor mortis is just about complete," he announced. "That would make it——"

"Hell's bells!" interrupted Leslie, "that would make it about the time that that poor devil was killed in the tavern at Xoatl!"

"Precisely, my fran'," said Don Arturo. "Eef that does not prove it to be the work of Satanás, what else will? Who but the devil could kill a man in Xoatl and at the same time dreenk José's blood? Now what you think, *señor el Doctor?*"

Blauvelt's face lengthened, and after a pause he countered dubiously, "I still maintain that there is a scientific explanation."

But the effort fell flat; which Blauvelt realized when no one bothered to contradict him. And they were all relieved when Hernandez finally said, "Pedro, tell Lizeta to get us some breakfast. The sun is rising, and Satanás will not walk——"

"Not until another night, Don Arturo," was the peon's somber response. "We live another day. And that day we will spend in leaving this accursed hacienda. All of us."

"So," said Hernandez to Leslie as he led the way to the broad veranda at the front of the ranch house. "You see what I have to contend with? Thees bargain—bah! Eef I am not myself keel some evening, I am busted. Which ees as bad."

3

DESPITE the successful efforts of Lizeta, the *mestiza* housekeeper, to turn out an American style breakfast in honor of Two-Gun Bart, the meal was as depressing as the dining-hall. The early morning sun accentuated the decrepitude of the hacienda which Don Arturo had not yet had time to modernize. And despite the new proprietor's efforts at being the gracious host, he was obviously worried at the somber words of Pedro.

"They will all walk out on me," Hernandez repeated. "And news travels fast. I weel not for love or money be able to keep any peons here."

"Señor," interposed Lizeta, "I am not afraid. And I will talk to the servants."

"If you do as good a job with them as you did with breakfast, they'll all stay," approved Leslie. Then, to his host: "Round up all the laborers and give them something to do. That'll keep them from getting morbid. And organizing a hunt to track down the monster will suggest the idea that the thing isn't such a terror after all. Sell them that notion, and then keep them moving. Right?"

Don Arturo brightened perceptibly.

"Seguramente! That should work. I weel try it."

He reached for his sombrero, took one of the Winchester rifles from the wall, and led the way toward the adobe shacks. The peons had already begun to collect their families and their scanty belongings. A dozen swarthy, stalwart men, square, chunky women, and a horde of half-naked children were milling about the area when Hernandez picked Pedro from the crowd.

"What sort of foolishness is this?" he demanded. "It is well enough to send the women and children away. But you, Pedro—are you one of them?"

Pedro sullenly regarded Hernandez and replied, "The devil is eating us, one by one. We do not stay any longer. This place is accursed."

"And so you forget your friends—your brothers—their children who were killed by the monster? You leave Don Bart to hunt the devil single-handed, do you?"

At the mention of Leslie's name, murmurs of interest swept the shaky throng. There were few of them who had not heard of Bart Leslie's reckless feats along the Rio Grande.

"Is that Don Bart?" countered Pedro, eyeing Leslie.

"But of course. And you make me very much ashamed. I told him last night that I had *men* on my hacienda, and now I find a pack of frightened girls. Last night the man-killer broke into Don Bart's room in Xoatl to drink his blood to keep him away from here. But Don Bart sent him howling into the darkness;

and now he is here to hunt him down and avenge your dead comrades.

"And before you leave, saddle some horses. Or would you have Don Bart hunt the devil on foot as well as single-handed? Or will only the household servants follow him? Lizeta and the *criadas*, they are staying."

Pedro's dark eyes narrowed and his swarthy face hardened. Then he said, "Me, I was going to stay. It is these others who were leaving. Tomas! Gregorio! Saddle up some horses. And one for me. I am going with Don Arturo."

Another added his voice to Pedro's; and in a moment the exodus was broken up.

"They are joost like children," whispered Hernandez. "So far, so good. But we must do something, queeck! Or they will finally leave."

"They're good for a day or so," assured Leslie. "But they'll be difficult to handle if there is another killing."

A few moments later, Pedro and Tomas returned with horses.

"How about it, Blauvelt?" demanded Leslie as he swung into the saddle. "Joining the hunt?"

"Certainly. I would not miss it for anything. But I'll not bother with a rifle. That, I gather, is your specialty. So I will devote myself to the interests of science."

And that, decided Leslie, as they filed from the corral in column of troopers, was more than satisfactory. Amateurs with firearms were more dangerous to the hunters than to the hunted.

HERNANDEZ wheeled his horse about, circled the adobe shacks, reined in his mount, and announced, "Here is a second set of tracks. His approach to José's house."

Judging from the shorter stride, the creature had been stalking its prey. They saw how it had been lurking behind a cottonwood, and how the hapless José's footprints ended in a confused thrashing.

"The monster's flight," reasoned Leslie, "should carry him by the most direct route to his den, whereas while he was on the prowl he would be zigzagging about, hunting his prey."

"That is reasonable," agreed Hernandez. "But I doubt that he does any hunting. He is accustomed to finding his food here."

Leslie spurred his mount forward so that for a moment he rode boot to boot with Hernandez.

"For hell's sweet sake, cut out cracks like that!" he warned in a low voice. "That'll scare the peons silly. And what's more, you're wrong. The brute must and probably does eat every day, and if it didn't have some other source of prey, the hacienda would have been depopulated months ago."

"Hmmm . . . that ees right," admitted Hernandez. "In fact, while there have for the past ten years been rumors of mysterious disappearances, as I learned too late—they did not become terrifyingly frequent until shortly after the earthquake."

"Ah—an earthquake?" This from Blauvelt, who had maneuvered his horse to Don Arturo's left flank. "I heard of it while I was in Oaxaca, at the hot springs. But was it serious?"

Hernandez shook his head.

"It cracked the adobe walls of the ranch house in a few places. The main force seems to have been in the mountains. Strangely enough, it greatly alarmed the peons. It was as though they had a premonition."

Blauvelt laughed. "Superstitious fancies—although the intuition of the savage is keen."

A clatter of hoofs interrupted the impending discourse on anthropology,

Pedro and half a dozen laborers came charging up.

"We are joining the hunt, *señor*," he announced. "The rest—they are staying to guard the hacienda."

"Very good," acknowledged Hernandez. "Now fall back, so Don Bart can follow the trail."

THE footprints of the monster led southwest from the ranch house and toward the Xoatl range. Leslie, backtracking, followed the trail readily enough across the tilled patches; but as he progressed into the open range, it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the gross, shapeless footprints.

"Seems to have made a bee-line," he observed, "heading directly from that pass in the foothills to the hacienda."

"And that weel make it difficult," muttered Hernandez. "The Xoatl range and its foothills have a mos' unsavory reputation among the Indians. When Hernan Cortez conquer' Mexico, some of the Nahua people, led by a chief call' Xoatl, fled from the invader and made their home in the caves with which those hill are honeycomb'. Even to this day, the peons can not be persuaded to go near those cave. They claim it is haunted by devils, by the ghosts of the Nahuas."

"Just as I said," interpolated Blauvelt. "That shows the extent of native superstition. Those Nahuas are undoubtedly the ancestors of your peons. In fact——"

"Hold it!" snapped Leslie, reining his horse back to its haunches.

He raised his hand, halting the cavalcade, then leaped from the saddle. A large silver button lay directly in the monster's trail. It was untarnished, and unfilmed with dust; but Leslie saw at a glance that the hand-hammered disk of silver did not match those that had made Don Arturo's gala costume resplendent.

"What distinguished visitors have you had around here lately?" demanded Leslie.

"None," replied the Mexican.

"This does not necessarily prove anything," continued Leslie. "But it hasn't been lying here long, and if the cannibal monster isn't wearing the finery of one of his victims, then some well-dressed gentleman crossed his trail quite recently."

"Or else," suggested Blauvelt, "someone is perpetrating a hoax, and is disguising himself as a monster."

"But who could walk with a stride that long?" countered Leslie.

"Stilts," was the prompt reply, "would solve that difficulty."

Leslie's answer was noncommittal: "We'll save the button, and maybe we'll find out who lost it."

They followed the trail for half a mile. It disappeared on stony ground; and despite his efforts, Leslie could not again pick it up.

"We're stuck," he finally announced, "though I'm sure he came from the foothills. Are there any bloodhounds near?"

"Not closer than ninety or a hundred miles," replied Hernandez.

Leslie wheeled his horse about.

"Tonight we'll post a guard about the peons' quarters," he said. "And when I get through filling him with lead, the extra weight will keep him from running so fast. In the meanwhile, we'd better grab a siesta so we'll be ready for an all-night watch."

4

LATE that afternoon the yapping of dogs, the excited chatter of the peons, and a stir and bustling in the patio of the ranch house penetrated into Leslie's room on the second floor. He stepped out to the gallery, and found that the cause of the disturbance was as lovely a girl as he had ever seen south of the Rio

Grande, or north of it. She was slender, shapely and colorful despite the severely simple tweed sports costume she had donned for a long trip from Monterey or Mexico City, Leslie decided, as he tried to picture her in the infinitely more striking garb which ladies of her class would wear in town.

"And look at Gorgeous go for Hernandez," was Leslie's half-envious comment. Then he noted that despite the modernity of her costume, she had made a concession to old Mexican traditions: a bent, white-haired woman in black accompanied her, the inevitable duenna.

Hernandez, glancing up toward the gallery, hailed his friend; and in a moment Leslie was presented to the visitors: Don Arturo's sister Maria, and her duenna, Señora Gomez. But Leslie had scarcely paid his respects when Hernandez interposed:

"You must leave at once, Maria. It is dangerous. Last night——"

"Dangerous?" She regarded Leslie with keen interest, laughed and said, "You speak of danger when Don Bart is with us? Ridiculous!"

Hernandez detailed the nature of the peril. Maria's dark eyes widened, and her lovely face became grave, but only for a moment.

"I am not afraid. And if I were, I would stay anyhow. I knew something was wrong. I sensed it from your letters, but of course I could not guess. Señora Gomez and I decided that it was financial worries, so I insisted on leaving Monterey to join you at the hacienda. You have been too generous, Arturo, and you can not afford to have me playing around the city while this impending loss faces you. I will not return. And besides, it is too late."

"Don Bart can drive you back to Xoatl to catch the next train——"

"Don Bart," she countered, "will make an everlasting enemy if he does not immediately develop tire trouble or run out of gas, or something of the sort. Quick, Don Bart—must I begin hating you, or will you be so obliging?"

Leslie, who had at first agreed with Hernandez, found his resolution melting before those smoldering dark eyes and cajoling, crimson smile.

"Lord, yes, Miss Hernandez!" he laughed. "The old tub's ready to fall to pieces, and I couldn't make it tonight—much as I'd enjoy a moonlight drive."

"Ah, that is much better! Arturo, what would the peons think if you sent your precious sister back to Monterey? What a splendid example, when those poor people are in such a panic!"

"Oh, all right," conceded Hernandez. "I'll tell Lizeta she has a new boss. And you will have a delightful time tyrannizing it over the servants, and I shall be worried silly. So get your things unpacked and be ready for dinner in an hour or so."

But before dinner was announced, the arrival of another visitor distracted the hacienda from the lurking menace that made each sunset the prelude for nightmare terror. A grizzled, white-bearded man mounted on a coal-black stallion and weighted down with silver braid came clinking toward the house. Leslie wondered at Hernandez's suddenly wrathful, somber expression as he regarded the latest arrival.

"That's Pacheco," muttered Hernandez. "The fellow who sold me this mare's-nest of a place!"

But while Hernandez was not effusively cordial, his greeting was courtly as he advanced to meet the leather-faced old fellow whose trailing spurs jingled like the sabers of a troop of cavalry as he strode toward the new owner of Hacienda de la Plata.

"We have just time for one of those

cocktail' *Americano,*" said Hernandez at the conclusion of the three-cornered exchange of compliments. Then, seeing Blauvelt lounging in the arcade, he added, "Be pleased to join us, *señor el Doctor.*"

And, true to type, Hernandez spoke of everything except the terror that was depopulating the hacienda. Leslie, instead of joining in the courteous circumlocution that inevitably preceded getting down to business, unobtrusively scrutinized the grizzled old fellow who had for years owned the hacienda. Pacheco, he decided, was shrewd, but on the level; and then Leslie began to wonder.

One of the silver buttons that ran in treble rows down the legs of Pacheco's tight-fitting trousers was missing; and the one that Leslie had picked up while trailing the monster perfectly matched those that remained in place.

"This old geezer," was Leslie's mental note, "will explain a few things to me before he's through swapping compliments with Hernandez. He might have been walking for his health last night, but if he did, he came a long way for a moonlight *paseo. . . .*"

And then things began to happen. It kept Leslie busy recording the rapid succession of instantaneous impressions.

LIZETA, the housekeeper, approached with a massive silver cocktail-shaker, one of the relics of Don Arturo's town house in Monterey. The look that passed between Pacheco and the *mestiza* housekeeper was flickering, but pointed. That set Leslie wondering. Lizeta's Spanish blood enlivened the heaviness of her features. She was still pleasant-faced and shapely, and not many years ago she must have been uncommonly handsome. . . .

Blauvelt, Leslie noted, was regarding Pacheco with unusual intentness for a scientist.

And then Pacheco dropped a bomb.

"Don Arturo," he said, breaking a pause in the flow of courtly nothings, "I wish to buy this hacienda from you. I won the capital prize in the lottery. My affairs have been shaky these past few years, or I would never have sold. But now I can afford to offer you a handsome profit."

Hernandez's face was an impassive brazen mask; but Leslie sensed his amazement. And then, ever vigilant, Leslie's eyes shifted like swords in swift play. He caught the momentary change in Blauvelt's scholarly features and pale blue eyes, and wondered why for an instant the German's glance crossed Lizeta's as she withdrew with the empty cocktail-shaker; and he wondered still more at the smoldering sullenness that marred her face as she shot a final look at Pacheco.

All in an instant; and the lightning succession of impressions left Leslie groping. Then he saw that Hernandez was smiling and making an evasive gesture as he replied to Pacheco's startling remark: "Don Romualdo, your remarks interest me. But be so good as to let me ponder on the matter. In the morning, perhaps, I will be more prepared to consider your generosity."

But the brusk old fellow laid his cards on the table: "My friend, I will be frank with you. I am a gambler, a speculator. You, I believe, are not. Therefore our interests are diverse. As for me, I want this hacienda mainly for the sake of the abandoned mine in the foothills. With the sharp rise of silver caused by the United States Government, I can profitably operate the mine. Not as profitably as my grandfather did, but well enough. There are countless tons of low-grade ore which the low price of silver made useless. Now it is otherwise.

"I am frank with you. If you wish to

operate the mine, I have nothing more to say. But the profit I can give you—double the price you paid me—will be more than this hacienda would yield in years.

"There has been a cloud over this place. I had difficulty with my peons. You will have the same. But my offer will——"

"You are too generous, Don Romualdo," evaded Hernandez. "And you are neglecting your drink. *A su salud, caballeros!*"

As he rolled a cigarette, Leslie tried to fit the jig-saw puzzle together. Pacheco, he was certain, had been stealthily prowling about the hacienda, despite his bluntness in declaring his aims. Pacheco must know more about the nightmare monster than anyone suspected; yet in view of the price of silver, he was ready to risk troubles of his own. Miners, with a dozen superstitions to every one of the peon, would be even more difficult to handle.

"I wonder," said Leslie to himself, "if Pacheco's yarn about the mine is pure hooey, and he has promoted this one-eyed monster to regain the hacienda he had to sell to raise money? And finally, why did Lizeta nail him with such a look?"

But before he could mull over the hastily gathered impressions, dinner was announced, and Hernandez led his guests to the dining-hall.

DESPITE the sparkling presence of Maria Hernandez, the meal was gloomy. There were no lamps, and the unshaded candles cast long, ominous shadows that reached into those that lurked in every corner of the great dining-hall. A shadow, reasoned Leslie, is only a shadow; nevertheless, he was glad he had worn his .45's to dinner. And as the meal dragged on, with forced sociability competing with Blauvelt's ponderous discourses, Leslie felt that the sooner he could break away and take his post among the peons, the better. The poor devils were depending on him to fight the monster single-handed; and moreover, another raid by the beast would finish Hernandez.

"Don Arturo—Miss Hernandez," he began, "it is dark outside. And if you will excuse——"

But Leslie did not complete his request. Maria's eyes, shifting toward some distraction beyond the dining-table, suddenly widened; and even before she cried out, Leslie knew that she had looked fear full in the face. He jerked his chair aside, half turned. For an instant he himself was paralyzed with amazement.

A monstrous, shapeless head was framed by one of the windows that pierced the two-foot thickness of the adobe wall. The face of the Thing was but vaguely human. By the dim outdoor light Leslie saw that in lieu of a nose the creature had gill-like slits; but the most terrifying aspect was the single monstrous eye that glared baleful and phosphorescent.

Shrill screams drowned hoarse exclamations and scraping of chairs; and then Bart Leslie's .45 stirred up thundering echoes in the spacious hall.

The head disappeared as fire spurted from his revolver. Leslie bounded clear of the table, dashed to the door, and swung around the corner of the house; but despite his speed, the monster had vanished. As Leslie circled about, seeking a footprint or possible splash of blood that would indicate the direction of flight, a woman ran screaming toward him. It was Lizeta, the *mestiza* housekeeper.

"Which way did it go? Did you see it?"

"*Si, si! Por allá, señor!*" Her excited gestures indicated the north. "It seized

me, but by the grace of God, I managed to break loose before it got a fair hold."

Leslie observed that Lizeta's face was scratched, her clothing torn, her eyes round and frightened. But before he could question her and get more explicit directions, Hernandez, Blauvelt and Pacheco rounded the farther corner of the ranch house.

"This way, Don Bart!" yelled Hernandez, catching sight of Leslie. He turned to head south.

"Hell," muttered Leslie, "they're all nutty—is it north, or is it south?"

But Hernandez would be more nearly right; and as Leslie caught up with the trio, he called them to halt to survey the level ground that stretched out into the shifting twilight. The peons, swarming from their cabins, joined the group.

"Look, *señor!*" muttered Pedro, who led them. "Over there. By the cottonwoods."

Leslie noted a stirring in the shadows, and for an instant saw a monstrous hulk go shambling from the shelter of one tree to the next. Despite its grotesque awkwardness, it moved with cat-like speed. Leslie bounded forward.

"*Por Dios!*" yelled Pedro. "He will kill you."

The monster vanished. Leslie halted, revolver ready. He caught a fresh glimpse of that gigantic mockery of humanity. His .45 crackled. They heard a hair-raising howl and a bestial bellowing. But as Leslie dashed forward to follow up his advantage, the crashing and crackling, and pounding of footsteps, told him that his fire had no more than frightened the creature. By the time that Leslie cleared the cottonwoods, it was bounding across the range like a kangaroo; and in the dusk, Leslie knew that even his marksmanship could not touch a moving target at that distance. He holstered his smoking revolver and retraced his steps.

"*Olé! Olé!* Don Bart!" applauded the peons.

"What did I tell you, idiots!" chuckled Hernandez. "Is not the devil himself afraid of Don Bart? And now maybe you will believe me and stay here, yes?"

"WELL, that's something," said Leslie as they returned to the house. "The *mozos* are convinced that the Thing can have the fear of God shot into its hide. And I'll admit I wasn't any too steady myself."

Then, as Blauvelt and Pacheco crossed the threshold to re-enter the dining-room, Leslie added in an undertone: "It looks as if I'll have to revamp my suspicions. It's a cinch Pacheco isn't wearing stilts and playing devil to scare you out of here."

"Nevertheless," was Hernandez's somber retort, "his offer to buy back the hacienda comes at a significant moment. He may know more about the monster than we think. He has lived for years in this region. And the good God alone knows what terrible things may not have come out of the countless caves of the Xoatl range. I am sorely tempted to accept his offer before he changes his mind."

"That," said Leslie, "is your business. But whether it's man, beast, or devil, I'm getting to the bottom of things or else you will be speaking of your friend the *late* Bart Leslie."

"God forbid!" was the devout wish. Then, resuming his place at the table, Hernandez said to Maria, "Well, little sister—do you think it would be wise to let Don Bart drive you back to Xoatl?"

"Positively not!" she declared. "I will stay here."

Leslie saw the futility of trying to reason with her. He turned to Blauvelt

and said, "Doctor, have you changed your opinion, or do you still insist it's all native superstition?"

Blauvelt was far from composed, and his scientific stubbornness was sagging.

"There is no doubt that there actually is such a monster. I could scarcely dispute it, after that hideous apparition. You remember the legend of the Cyclops—the one-eyed giant of the *Odyssey?*"

Leslie nodded.

"It *is* by no means impossible," continued Blauvelt, "that we have seen a reversion to type, an example of atavism. Science, while to a degree discounting legend and superstition, has finally come to the conclusion that many of the classical fables did in the dim mists of antiquity have an origin in truth. And thus I am willing to concede that perhaps this monster could be one of that fabled race of one-eyed giants. In that case we have but seen the beginning of terror. The creature may be of such primitive nervous organization that unless you literally chopped it to pieces with bullets, you could scarcely harm it."

Leslie smiled grimly; but before Blauvelt could carry on to offer scientific proof of the existence of the terror he had so stubbornly denied, Hernandez abruptly interrupted, "We will all sleep under arms tonight. While I scarcely anticipate a return of the monster, having our guns handy will promote rest."

"And in the meanwhile," said Leslie, "I'll stand watch with the *mozos*. Lord knows I'd not want any of them killed. Not after the big hand they gave me for my bum shooting."

But before he left the room, he stepped to Blauvelt's place and whispered in his ear, "Listen, friend: one more word from you about Cyclops legends, and I'll tie you in knots. I can appreciate your fair-mindedness in admitting a change of heart, but Miss Hernandez is familiar enough with mythology to be scared silly by scientific proof that Ulysses probably did watch a one-eyed giant eat his comrades one by one. Talk about botany for a change!"

And while the learned doctor was digesting that, Leslie was stalking toward the door.

5

When Leslie reached his post, he found Pedro, armed with a machete and a shotgun, sitting at the foot of a huge cottonwood.

"*Que tal*, Pedro?"

"*'Sta bueno, señor,*" was the big fellow's response, quite in contrast to his earlier gloom. "Me, I am afraid of nothing. But these other fellows——"

His contemptuous gesture indicated the peons who had retired to adobe shacks. But Leslie could in no wise relax his own vigilance, for now that Pedro was inflated with new-found valor, he would in all probability fall soundly asleep and thus be an easy victim of the Cyclops.

Several hours passed, and the voices from within the ranch house at last subsided. The silence, however, was presently broken by footsteps, and Leslie, in response to his low-voiced challenge, heard Hernandez say, "It is I—Arturo."

"What do you make of it all? Particularly Pacheco. He's a sour note if there ever was one."

Hernandez shrugged and replied, "It is true that he may be using the one-eyed devil to further his plans. But I can hardly see how he could be responsible for the beast. And while your finding that silver button proves that he was spying around here, we certainly cannot claim that he is masquerading as a cannibal. He was with us when the Cyclops looked

in through the window. "But what is your thought, *amigo?*"

"It's damn' confused, and getting more so. I sense a dirty mess of trickery; yet I can't for the life of me see how anyone can be more than just making use of circumstances. But now that you're here—halt!"

Hernandez ducked to the shadow of a cottonwood. Leslie drew his .45 and whirled to face the figure that loomed up in the dark; but a voice reassured him.

"Never mind cocking your revolver. This is Blauvelt. I have finally arranged my argument, and perhaps while you're on watch, you'd have time to listen to me prove that the recent earthquake quite conceivably has something to do with the recrudescence of this one-eyed monster. As you remember, the Cyclops of legend dwelt in caverns, and——"

"Mighty damn' interesting, Doctor," interrupted Leslie, holstering his Colt. "But suppose you explain it to Don Arturo while you're helping him stand watch. He just came out to relieve me while I went on the prowl."

Whereupon Leslie entered the patio of the ranch house and ascended the stairs to the second floor. He was already familiar with the assignment of rooms and lost no time in stealing through the darkness toward Pacheco's door. His intent was no more than to check up and see whether the old fellow was asleep, sitting up, or perhaps already engaged in another nocturnal promenade around the hacienda; but as he approached the door, he learned that he had another, though not entirely unexpected factor to take into account.

There was no streak of light reaching out from the threshold, but Pacheco was neither asleep nor alone. And the voice was that of Lizeta, the housekeeper.

"Then increase your offer," she was saying. "If Don Arturo won't take your first bid, try again."

"No, *por Dios!*" growled Pacheco. "And even if I doubled my offer—which I can't and won't—he wouldn't take it, now that this never too much to be accursed Gringo has that monster on the run. That Bart Leslie will surely kill him. If not today, then tomorrow. Hernandez knows that, and he will not sell except at a ruinous price.

"Now get out! You are a damned pest, and you forget your place. By-gones are by-gones, and why drag up ancient history——"

Lizeta's wrathful reply was inarticulate, then distinctly profane, and finally, threatening.

"You white-bearded old goat," she snarled, "if you'll do nothing about it, then *I* will."

She started toward the door. Leslie shrank into the shadow of a pilaster and watched Lizeta burst wrathfully into the hallway, and thence to the lower floor. Presently Leslie descended to the patio. He could no longer doubt that Lizeta and Pacheco were plotting against Hernandez; but the *mestiza's* threat perplexed him. Leslie hoped that that pest of a scientist would not be too difficult to side-track, as a few confidential words with Hernandez were then and there in order. It was with considerable relief that he learned, as Hernandez accosted him near the laborers' shacks, that Blauvelt had left but a moment ago.

"He held forth charmingly as to the reality of that eleven-foot man-eating monster," said Hernandez. "Which of course we have had terrible proof. And I remarked to that effect, which——"

"Nuts for him!" chuckled Leslie. "You'd better tell me a bit about Pacheco, and a lot about your housekeeper. Among other things, she gave me a bum steer when I took after the Cyclops

this evening, which set me thinking. Then I just overheard her reading the riot act to Pacheco."

Leslie detailed his impressions, then concluded, "And now what do you make of it?"

"It is no secret," replied Hernandez, "that Pacheco and his pretty *mestiza* housekeeper were quite friendly, years ago. It would seem that Lizeta hopes to regain her lost status as unofficial lady of the hacienda, which of course would be impossible unless I sell out to Pacheco. But, *sangre de Cristo!* You surely can't believe that Lizeta is engineering a monstrous hoax, and impersonating this awful beast? Impossible, my fran'!"

"Nothing is impossible," countered Leslie. "Of course she's not impersonating it. But she lied like hell when I dashed out looking for it. And I can't find any signs of the struggle she described. And she's on the war-path. So——"

But Leslie's conclusion was not enunciated. He was interrupted by a shrill scream. Only a woman in extreme terror could thus cry out. Leslie's first thought was that Lizeta had returned to resume the quarrel with Pacheco, and that the brusk old fellow was trying to kill her, and that he knew that some woman was in fear of more than death.

"It's the Cyclops!" yelled Leslie as he dashed toward the house. "It's broken in! Rout out the peons! Saddle up horses, while I——"

And as he ran, Leslie saw Hernandez had booted Pedro to his feet, and heard him shouting orders. He bounded across the patio and up the stairs. The second floor was in a turmoil. He heard a woman sobbing, heard Blauvelt's demand, "Vot iss?"

The disturbance came from Maria's room. Leslie cleared the threshold at a leap, and saw Blauvelt striking light to a candle. Old Señora Gomez lay writhing and screaming on the floor. Maria's bed was empty. The heavy window-bars had been wrenched from their sockets as though they had been tallow candles instead of three-quarter inch, hand-wrought iron.

"The devil—the one-eyed monster," cried the old woman. "He broke in—seized her—I tried to stop him—my arm is broken—Don Bart, save her——"

"Which way did he go?" demanded Leslie.

Señora Gomez indicated the window.

"Blauvelt, round up Lizeta to take care of the old lady!" commanded Leslie. "Then join us at the corrals. We'll track the beast down if we have to climb hell's back stairs barefooted. Get Pacheco, too!"

Leslie descended the stairs, three steps at a time. He tore through the dining-room, swept three rifles from their pegs as he ran, and continued his rush toward the corral.

"Hernandez!" he shouted. "It got Maria! I'm going out on foot. You follow on horse. Moon's rising, and maybe I can keep it in sight!"

He dropped his load of rifles, turned and sprinted toward the direction taken by the Cyclops earlier in the evening. As he passed beneath Maria's window, he saw, distinct in the moonlight, the monstrous footprints of the beast. Revolver in hand, he plowed through a truck garden, toward the outer fringe of trees in which the beast had played hide and seek while favored by twilight gloom.

Leslie noted with relief that there was no trail of blood. Profiting by its earlier experience, the Cyclops was not pausing to kill his victims. That would give Maria a chance; and despite its prodigious strength, the beast could scarcely be so fleet of foot when burdened by its prey.

A despairing, half-strangled shriek guided Leslie. And then Maria's outcry ceased.

Leslie, clearing the intervening trees, caught his first full, unobstructed view of the blood-thirsty terror. It towered monstrously in the moon-glow, a lurching, nightmare figure all the more hideous for its semblance to humanity. Under one arm it carried Maria Hernandez as though she were a kitten. The other arm swung free, a great, misshapen appendage that reached to the creature's knees. Its long, annihilating strides as it struck out across the open range and toward the Xoatl foothills were gaining on Leslie, gaining at a dismaying rate, despite his heart-breaking sprint. Behind him he heard shouts and the snorting of horses, the clatter of hoofs, the excited yells of the aroused peons—but he wondered, as he pushed on, whether the pursuit could be organized in time.

He halted, forced his shaking muscles to obey, and leveled his .45. Moonlight, and a moving target at that range made the attempt dangerous, despite the bulk of the creature; but Leslie aimed low. For a moment the roar and thunder of the heavy revolver drowned the tumult in the rear. Leslie heard the monster bellow, stagger, lurch forward, and then recover.

"Hit him, by heaven!" he growled, renewing the pursuit. But despite Leslie's sniping, the Cyclops was gaining. Terror urged him to greater speed. And then the rushing horsemen caught up with Leslie. Hernandez yelled, Leslie turned, saw an unmounted mustang, and swung himself into the saddle as the cavalcade swept past him. He booted his horse into the press of the peons.

"Gangway!" he shouted, charging through.

The calico mustang was swift. Leslie forged into the lead, Hernandez following in his trace. They were gaining; and the peons, seeing the marauder in full flight, were yelling and shooting. Leslie turned in the saddle.

"Cut that out, you damn' fools!" he yelled. "Hold your fire! You'll kill the girl!"

But there was no controlling their exultant wrath. They mistook his shout for an exhortation to fire faster and ride harder. Jets of dust rose white in the moonlight, and lead sizzled dismayingly from every side.

"Block 'em, Arturo! For hell's sweet sake, block 'em while I loop around and flank the beast so I can plug him!" yelled Leslie. "They'll kill her!"

Hernandez cursed wrathfully, reined his horse to its haunches and wheeled about as Leslie, sweeping to the flank and clear of the spray of lead, leaned across his horse's neck, leveled his pistol, and blasted a screaming streak of slugs at the monster. The beast bellowed, bounded erratically, dropped its victim, and settled down to run at a terrific pace. They were nearing the rocky outcropping at the base of the foothills. The Cyclops had the advantage now. Horses would go down like nine-pins in that treacherous surface. Leslie booted his mustang forward, belted it across the hindquarters with the barrel of his smoking revolver, and as the Cyclops bounded from the cover of one gigantic boulder toward the shelter of the next, Leslie wheeled his beast for a broadside shot.

But as his finger contracted on the trigger, he felt a searing stab in his shoulder. His shot went wild. And then his horse faltered, missed a stride, and crumpled in a kicking heap, pitching Leslie to the rocks. As he struggled to his feet, the yelling cavalcade closed in, and reined to a halt.

Don Bart's fall had sapped their enthusiasm. And before Leslie could commandeer a horse, he heard Hernandez

yelling from the rear. The peons wheeled about.

"——— ——— jugheads!" Leslie cursed. He knew that before he could get a mount and resume the pursuit, the Cyclops would be safely in its lair. Then he remembered the sturdy mustang that had carried him to a fall. He retrieved his pistol to put the beast out of its misery. But as he turned, he saw the horse was motionless. Slightly to the rear of the shoulder was a round, black spot: a bullet hole. And oozing from the other side was a dark pool of blood. He knew then that his horse had been shot from under him.

"Pacheco, by heaven!" muttered Leslie as he set out on foot to join the group that had gathered about Hernandez. "And when I get a quiet word with him——"

6

MARIA HERNANDEZ, though bruised, shaken and hysterical, was none the worse for her terrifying experience.

"Mount up, Arturo!" said Leslie. Then he swung the disheveled girl up to the saddle in front of her brother. That done, he mounted a horse that Pedro had taken from one of the *mozos*, and joined his friend. Blauvelt was at Hernandez's left, but Leslie had thus far seen no sign of Pacheco. Something was off color; but Leslie had to admit that one of the excited *mozos* could have fired a wild shot.

Leslie therefore decided to hold his peace until further investigation would justify an accusation. Moreover, he had stumbled across a query that was even more baffling: why had the invading monster made its second unprecedented attack on the house, and why had it picked Maria Hernandez? Pure chance, he admitted, was a logical answer; and that would have been acceptable had it not been for one detail he had noted as he had gathered the girl in his arms to lift her to the saddle: knotted to a strand of her streaming black hair was a tuft of some pungent, aromatic herb. And while the odor was not unpleasant, it was certainly not one which a city-bred girl would favor as a scent, and least of all employ in such primitive form.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Hernandez," was Leslie's casual remark, "do you find mosquitos troublesome out here?"

She eyed him quizzically, then regarded her bare feet and arms, laughed, and said, "Why, no, of course not. But whatever makes you think of mosquitos, at a time like this?"

"I was just wondering," evaded Leslie. Maria, he concluded, had certainly not tied that tuft of aromatic herbs to her hair to discourage mosquitos. And then Leslie addressed Don Asturo:

"I'm sure I winged the beast at least once. I think that if we start a little before daybreak, we can track it to its lair by following the blood splashes."

"Bueno," Hernandez replied. "And once we smoke it out, there will be an end to Señor Pacheco's generous offers."

"Hmmm . . . so you think he's behind it?"

"Quien sabe? Its depredations certainly favor him, though that may prove nothing after all." Then, feeling that he had overstepped himself, he turned to Blauvelt and said, *"Señor el Doctor,* be pleased to forget that careless remark. I would not for anything do Pacheco an injustice. And I trust that you have made sufficient observations in the interests of science? Or perhaps you would like to accompany us on the hunt?"

"It would be a rare privilege," declared Blauvelt. "In fact, I would insist. I would even like to capture the beast alive. It would be a rare acquisition for a zoo or museum."

Leslie and Hernandez accompanied Maria to her room. Señora Gomez, they learned, had not been injured as seriously as she had said; her arm was but wrenched, and not broken. But Leslie was more interested in the now familiar aroma that pervaded the room occupied by Maria and her ancient duenna.

"Miss Hernandez," said Leslie in a low voice, as he plucked a strand of the girl's dark hair and drew it forward so that she could see it. "I have an excellent reason for asking you an odd question: why do you wear this tuft of herbs in your hair?"

"Why—why, good Lord, Don Bart—who put it there? I surely didn't."

"I thought not," was Leslie's comment. "Say nothing about it. But take it off, right now. I begin to see why you were selected by the monster. This strange, pungent odor marked you in the dark."

And before Maria or her brother could comment, Leslie was striding down the hall toward Pacheco's room. He was certain that the inhuman ogre had human devilishness to aid him; but Leslie's wrath fled as he kicked the door open and played his flashlight into the darkness.

He had half expected to find that Pacheco had fled; but the spectacle that confronted Leslie left him dazed and horrified. Pacheco, sprawled crosswise in his disordered bed, lay face up and drenched with blood. His throat had been gouged out as though gigantic, iron fingers had torn loose a handful of flesh.

"Hernandez! Good heaven, look at this!" shouted Leslie.

Blauvelt and the Mexican came running.

"*Madre de Cristo!*" muttered Hernandez, crossing himself. "And to think that I suspected him of this villainy. But how do you account——"

"At the best," interposed Blauvelt, "we can no more than guess. But it seems that the beast killed Pacheco. Then, startled—it would be timid, you recollect, on account of our having pursued it earlier in the evening—it left before drinking the blood of its victim, and on its way out, it seized Miss Hernandez, whom it hoped to devour at its leisure."

"Reasonable," conceded Leslie. "Or else it's another example of the creature's diabolical dexterity. You remember it raided my room in the tavern at Xoatl, and almost at the same time, it killed one of Don Arturo's peons, miles away. Obviously, there must be more than one of the monsters."

"Precisely, Mr. Leslie," said Blauvelt. "And that substantiates my contentions to the effect that there is a nest of them. A tribe, perhaps, of man-eating Cyclops. They may for centuries have been imprisoned in some inaccessible valley in the Xoatl range, but now, due to the shifting of the terrain, caused by the recent earthquake, an exit has been provided for them."

"And," muttered Hernandez, "they will make this hacienda a delightful place."

"Anyhow," said Leslie, "the beast hasn't eaten tonight. Hunger will drive it out again, soon, despite its hot reception. I'm going back on post and stand guard until it's time to renew the pursuit. The rest of you may as well get a bit of sleep."

Shortly before the first signs of dawn, Leslie heard a door slam; and before he could challenge the shapeless figure in the gloom, he heard a familiar voice saying, "This is Blauvelt, Leslie. I'm not taking any chances on your resuming the chase alone, and it'll soon be time to set out."

"Fair enough, Doctor," agreed Leslie. "And the more I think of it, the more I'm convinced that a couple of us quietly tracking the beast on foot will be a lot more successful than the Mexican version

of a steeplechase. With all the yelling *mozos,* and one horse shot out from under me already, I'd prefer to be certain that the danger is in front and not behind me."

Blauvelt chuckled and asked, "When do you start?"

"Right now. As quickly as I can wake Hernandez and tell him to stand watch during our absence. I've got my flashlight, but you may as well bring yours, and a revolver."

A few minutes later they set out on foot in the general direction of the last unsuccessful pursuit. The carcass of the calico mustang, stripped of saddle and bridle, marked the spot where the chase had ended. Circling about, and playing the beams of their flashlights on the rocky slope, they soon picked up traces of the monster's footprints, and splashes of blood spilled by Leslie's long-range shot.

"Not bleeding heavily," said Leslie, "but his exertions will make the flow continue."

He led the way up the slope. The general direction of the trail was leading toward an arroyo. Rocks recently knocked loose from their bed of earth showed where the Cyclops had crossed with two prodigious leaps. Fifty yards farther, a handprint, and greasewood half uprooted, guided Leslie.

"He stumbled. Pretty well corked," Leslie diagnosed. "Too bad someone plugged my pinto. Hell of a fine marksman in the crowd, only his gun wasn't pointed the right way!"

And then the lay of the land began to aid Leslie. A cleft in the hills widened out into a small valley just beyond; and the first signs of daybreak made the tracking faster. Blauvelt, stumbling and puffing, had to conserve his breath and desist from scientific comment. But at the end of another two odd miles, Leslie halted.

"Get your wind, Blauvelt," he said in a tense voice. "And give your hand a chance to steady a bit. We may both have to do some fast shooting when we rout him out. He's big as a box car, and Lord knows how many .45's he may assimilate before he takes the count."

"*Ach,* so you haff dee game tracked down?" wondered the scientist, lapsing into a thick accent. Leslie's suppressed excitement was contagious.

"Yes. See that dark blot half-way up the hillside? A cave, sure as the Lord made little apples. And his prints head that way."

"Mmm . . . that is so," admitted Blauvelt. "And now vot?"

"Smoke him out! Let's go!" snapped Leslie, anticipating and blocking a reflective pause in the interest of science. Blauvelt scrambled after him. As he scaled the slope, Leslie pocketed his flashlight. The tracks were plain in the gray dawn.

"Easy," he cautioned in a whisper. Soundlessly they covered the last fifty yards, picking their way among bleached bones scattered near the entrance of a blackly gaping cavern from the mouth of which a human skull grinned hideous warning of the cannibal who lurked somewhere in the honeycombed heart of the hill.

Leslie halted at the lip of the opening, and grimaced wryly at the charnel stench that filtered from the gloom. He heard a vague stirring and an asthmatic wheezing, but the deceptive acoustics of the cave distorted the sound and robbed it of direction; and Leslie, though straining his eyes, could not pick the monster's bulk from the enveloping gloom, despite the steadily increasing brightness without. He drew and cocked his .45, and crouched, ready to fire; but the odor of death, and

that ominous wheezing snore, shook even Leslie's iron nerves.

"Hell with this waiting!" he muttered. Then, glancing back for an instant, he whispered, "Pass me your flashlight. Mine's a bit dim."

Blanvelt's face was gray, and his hand trembled as he fumbled for the light.

Leslie jerked his eyes back into line, and with his left hand reached over his shoulder. The monster might be alert and lurking, warned by its beast-instinct that danger was present.

As Leslie's fingers closed on the nickeled cylinder, he felt the transmitted tremor of the scientist's hand. And then, an instant too late, he sensed that peril was behind him as well as in the darkness ahead. A numbing blow crushed his Stetson down to his ears, and a vigorous thrust from the rear sent him pitching headlong into the gaping mouth of the cavern. Leslie, though conscious, was momentarily paralyzed by the impact that would have brained him but for the cushioning of his hat. His sluggish, instinctive effort to break his fall resulted in nothing but the loss of his revolver. He crashed against a ledge, dropped another yard into blackness, and then thumped sprawling to a gently sloping, rocky floor. In this tumbling descent, his second revolver, loosened for action, slid from its holster and clattered into the gloom.

Leslie's involuntary yell of dismay echoed in the cavern, and masked the rattle of rocks dislodged by Blanvelt's precipitate flight down the hillside. Leslie licked his dry lips, gritted his teeth, and forced his numbed body to obey; but as he struggled to his feet, he heard a hoarse grunt and a ponderous stirring in the darkness at his right. Before he could jerk his flashlight into play and locate one of his revolvers, a bestial bellowing shook the cavern, and dislodged fragments of rock clattered to the floor. Heavy feet shuffled, and then a single monstrous eye glowed phosphorescently from the gloom. It was too late for Leslie to collect himself and attempt to scramble toward the mouth of the cave, some two yards above the floor. He saw that his retreat was cut off.

A gigantic, scarcely human shape was for an instant silhouetted against the increasing outer brilliance. Then it lurched forward, sniffing and mewling and whining. Leslie knew that it had scented him. The blazing eye shifted, and as it picked him out of the shadows, in blind desperation Leslie groped for a stone, and hurled it.

The monster charged. Leslie ducked, felt sharp talons rip his coat; and then a second flailing sweep, missing its grasp, sent him crashing against the cavern wall. He flattened to the floor as the Cyclops wheeled, and before the enraged, hungry beast could crush him, Leslie shot himself forward between the monster's legs. His hands seized another jagged rock, recovered, and hurled the missile, catching the brute full in the chest as it turned to close in. The impact for an instant checked the charge, but Leslie knew that the end was near. His head was splitting, his breath came in sharp, agonized gasps, and the veins at his temples were distended like fire hose. He knew that he could not possibly dash toward the entrance and clamber up the steep, shelved ascent, nor could he reach the revolver that gleamed dully near the opening. One more rush, and——

Leslie whirled, tripped on the half-stripped thigh-bone of one of the victims whose fate he was about to share. The beast lunged; but instead of dodging, Leslie plunged headlong into the narrow crevice he had just perceived. He felt the monster's nails dig into his ankle, kicked clear, before the fingers could

close, and wormed his way into the cleft, a yard beyond the enemy's reach.

For the moment he was safe, for the Cyclops could not force his bulk into the crevice; but he crouched at the mouth of the opening, glaring at his trapped prey, and fingering the thwarting tongues of rock. In the dim light Leslie for the first time had a clear view of the Cyclops, and shivered as he regarded the creature he had fought in the darkness. The entire body was deep purple, with a spongy texture like the comb and wattles of a rooster. Beneath the single eye that glared from the low forehead were two slits, vestigial nostrils; but the crowning horror was the sphincter-like mouth that twitched and drooled saliva as it alternately covered and exposed four long gleaming fangs that would at one bite slash a man's throat to ribbons.

That twitching, hideous mockery of a mouth, that hungry, infantile mewling for Leslie's blood told him why the victims had been drained dry of their vital fluid; and as he struggled to keep his stomach under control, he sensed the reason for the beast's blood-drinking: its lower jaw was so undeveloped that it could not masticate solid food.

"And it must have been a sub-human monster, like this one," he said, forcing his eyes away from the sickening, thirsty mouth, "that originated the Cyclops legend of ancient days. Blauvelt was right." Then with a grim thin smile, "And if I ever get out of here alive, I'll give that boy a demonstration in the interests of science!"

He was certain that Blauvelt had not struck him in a blind panic induced by the proximity of the monster. Blauvelt had deliberately thrown him to the beast; but Leslie had no time to ponder on the doctor's motives. The Cyclops, though baffled, had not given up. He was now wrenching and tugging at the rocks that obstructed the mouth of Leslie's refuge.

A fragment separated. It was not large enough materially to widen the opening, but the beast took hope; and Leslie, recoiling, wondered whether the giant would be intelligent enough to use a lever, or a chunk of rock as an improvised hammer.

"Lucky he's too dumb to throw rocks at me," he muttered as he watched the expansion and contraction of the brute's incredible muscles. "But killing me's no good, unless he can reach me. I'm just groceries to him."

Another fragment broke loose.

"God!" muttered Leslie, stunned by the explosion of energy.

As he watched the gradual march of doom, he became aware of a curiously familiar, pungent odor. It was undeniably a breath of that same odd herb which someone had tied to Maria's hair. Leslie hastily dug into his pockets. He found a small packet. He had not previously noted its odor on account of the sickening stench of the unconsumed remains of the monster's victims, but now his nostrils were becoming accustomed to it.

"Hmmm . . . someone tagged me with this so the beast would be sure and pick me, even in the dark . . . and in the excitement of tracking, I wouldn't notice it . . . that was either Blauvelt, or—who else?"

He tossed the packet past the Cyclops. The monster abandoned his efforts, picked up the aromatic herb, pawed it like a kitten mauling a ball of catnip, gurgled and drooled as it thrust the packet into its mouth. But the distraction did not give Leslie a chance to dash for his revolvers; and for the instant, he was too wrathful to have ventured a break.

"The ——— ———!" he cursed. "Planted that stuff on Maria so the beast

would get her! It goes for that stuff like a dog for anise, or a cat for valerian."

And then the Cyclops, mumbling and drooling, returned to his task with renewed vigor, as though stimulated by the herb. Grunting, heaving, clawing, it tugged at the tongue of rock which was the key to Leslie's refuge. Once that yielded, the jig was up. And the beast seemed to sense, finally, that he was on the right track.

A cold sweat cropped out on Leslie as he watched the rock perceptibly yielding. A dozen men could never have budged it, but the Cyclops could concentrate his strength. That one fantastic eye now glowed with triumph. That eye——

And then Leslie tore a page from an ancient book. Thirty centuries ago, a man had thwarted a similar monster. Leslie had no sharpened stake to char to a red heat; but the principle was good. He jerked his flashlight from his pocket, extracted the three cells, broke them open against the sharp rocks. He gathered the corrosive chemicals, powdered carbon and sal ammoniac moistened with acid, and crumbled them to granules.

The rock lurched an inch as the monster's mighty back arched. The Cyclops grunted, looked up—but before he could renew his prodigious assault, Leslie bounded forward, hurling the double handful of chemicals squarely into the ferociously blazing eye.

The blinded beast howled with pain and clawed his burning orb. Leslie cleared the crevice, dodged a flailing, sightless sweep, crashed against the wall of the cavern, and leaped for his revolver. The Cyclops turned, but his charge was erratic. Leslie's .45 crackled like a machine-gun. The Cyclops staggered, roared, and lurched forward, bleeding but vengeful and unweakened. Leslie whirled, but missed his footing. A stunning blow knocked him into a corner; but as the monster followed, Leslie's gun snapped into line. For an instant he held his fire. Only two cartridges remained, and they had to count. . . .

"Smack-smack!" The beast halted, tottered, and *chunked* ponderously to the floor, drilled through the eye and brain.

"By heaven, I should have brought a cannon!" muttered Leslie, attempting to rise. But his knees were weak, and he crawled to the mouth of the cavern, where he retrieved his second revolver. Then he slumped in a heap, staring at the hulk that lay huddled and still twitching when it should be stone-dead.

"NERVES like a turtle," said Leslie, wondering if peril was finally over. Then, as his strength returned, he pulled himself to the first shelf. But before he could hoist himself over the lip of the cavern, he heard a voice, and drew back to listen.

"Hombrecito! Hombrecito!" called a woman.

"What *little man* can she be looking for?" wondered Leslie.

He peeped over the lip of the entrance. Lizeta was a few yards from the cave. Near her were two earthenware ollas apparently full of milk. And then he saw Blauvelt dashing up the slope. Leslie cursed, cocked his .45, then controlled his wrath.

"Hombrecito!" repeated Lizeta, as though hailing someone in the cave. Leslie was perplexed, and then the hideous truth dawned on him.

"Never mind feeding him," shouted Blauvelt. Lizeta started as though prodded with hot irons.

"Oh—*Señor el Doctor!* But why not? He is hungry. He will come out and Don Bart will kill him."

"He's not hungry," was Blauvelt's retort. "And Don Bart won't kill anyone. Now that your *hombrecito* has attended

to that meddler, Hernandez will sell out, *muy pronto.*"

"And then——"

"Don't worry, Lizeta—you'll be the new mistress of the hacienda. All I want is the old silver mine. Now hurry back to the house, before someone misses you. You fool, didn't I tell you——"

"But I thought——"

And then Leslie emerged from the cavern, grim, white-faced, his eyes cold as sword-points. His pistols were holstered.

"Wait a minute, Blauvelt!" he challenged.

Lizeta screamed. Blauvelt stood nailed in his tracks. His face had become pistachio-green in the early morning light. He tried to speak and gesture, but his mouth moved soundlessly.

"Draw your gun, Blauvelt," Leslie commanded. "The gun you knocked me on the head with."

"But—what do you mean?——how——"

"Draw your gun," reiterated Leslie. "I'll give you a fair start. I'm too old to start killing unarmed men. Except for that *hombrecito* in the cave, and that wasn't a man——"

Lizeta's comprehension was instant. Her scream of grief and anguish shook Leslie's frayed nerves. The distraction was but an instant, yet that instant was deadly. Blauvelt saw his chance. His revolver jerked from its holster and into line. Lizeta leaped raging toward Leslie. All in a confusing whirl—and then Two-Gun Bart reached for his gun. He made it by a hair. The prolonged roar of Leslie's .45 blended with the crackle of Blauvelt's weapon.

Blauvelt bent in the middle as though he had run into a waist-high fence, convulsively jerked a second shot, and collapsed like a Japanese lantern. It was not until a moment later that Leslie saw that Lizeta had not tripped, but that Blauvelt's wild shot had struck her as she rushed Leslie. As he knelt beside the comely *mestiza,* Leslie saw that she was not fatally wounded; but this he kept to himself.

"Better tell me what it's about, Lizeta," he urged. "Why——"

"Get a priest," she moaned.

"Too late," was Leslie's grim retort; but even before she explained, he sensed the tragedy that Lizeta was about to reveal. Then he heard a clatter of hoofs, and saw Hernandez galloping up the draw. Maria and a pair of *mozos* followed. They dismounted in time to catch the essentials of Lizeta's explanation.

"He was my son," she said. "Don Romualdo—Pacheco—was his father. Eighteen years ago—when I was a girl—he was born in this cave. *Madre de Dios!*—It was God's punishment for our sin. But he was mine. What could I do? Abandon him? He had no jaws to eat solid food. So I fed him milk for a dozen years. But once he killed a chicken and sucked its blood. He liked it, the blood. Then—he was enormous for his age—he learned to kill larger animals—then people—and I could not always carry milk to the cave."

"Cristo del Grao!" exclaimed the horrified Hernandez. "I wondered why she set out with two ollas so early this morning. So we followed her. And that——"

"But why——" resumed Leslie.

Lizeta anticipated his question, and explained in a steadier voice, "If Don Arturo kept the hacienda, my *hombrecito* would sooner or later be hunted down and killed. So I helped the Doctor Blauvelt, who said that the earthquake had uncovered a new, rich vein in the old silver mine. But I did not kill Pacheco. I often wanted to, but I

didn't. That was Blauvelt, who did not want Pacheco to buy back the hacienda. Me, I would have been glad, even if he would not have given me the house where I used to be young and beautiful, years ago."

The grimness faded from Leslie's face. He gestured to Hernandez and Maria. As they withdrew, he whispered in Lizeta's ear, "Tell me why you put that strange-smelling herb in Doña Maria's hair. You have been punished long enough—I will say nothing to anyone."

"Because she was young and beautiful, and I feared that Blauvelt would rob me of the house he promised me, and let her——"

"Forget it. There's a good chance that you'll live," said Leslie. Then, hailing the *mozos,* "Carry her back to the house."

"BUT how could such an awful brute be born to any human woman?" was Hernandez's query as Leslie joined him and Maria. "Satan, and not Pacheco, was its father—or some beast——"

Leslie shook his head.

"If Blauvelt had lived to explain, he could do better than I can. This Cyclops is an extreme example of a rare but not unknown abnormality. And as nearly as I can mangle the Britannica—under the heading of 'monster'—it is an example of teratology, caused by a deficiency in formative power in the embryo, and resulting in what the doctors call 'imperfect separation of symmetrical parts.'

"And now I can see the fine hand of Blauvelt from the beginning. That poor devil of a waiter we put in my room in the tavern at Xoatl was not killed by the Cyclops, but by Blauvelt or a native accomplice, thinking of course he was butchering me and putting the fear of God into you.

"And Pacheco's death was similarly motivated. Blauvelt, having rediscovered a fresh outcropping of silver in the old mine, was without doubt prowling around before we met him in Xoatl, and had both opportunity and motive for trying to cast suspicion on Pacheco and thwart his attempted repurchase of the hacienda. Now let's get going. I need a drink."

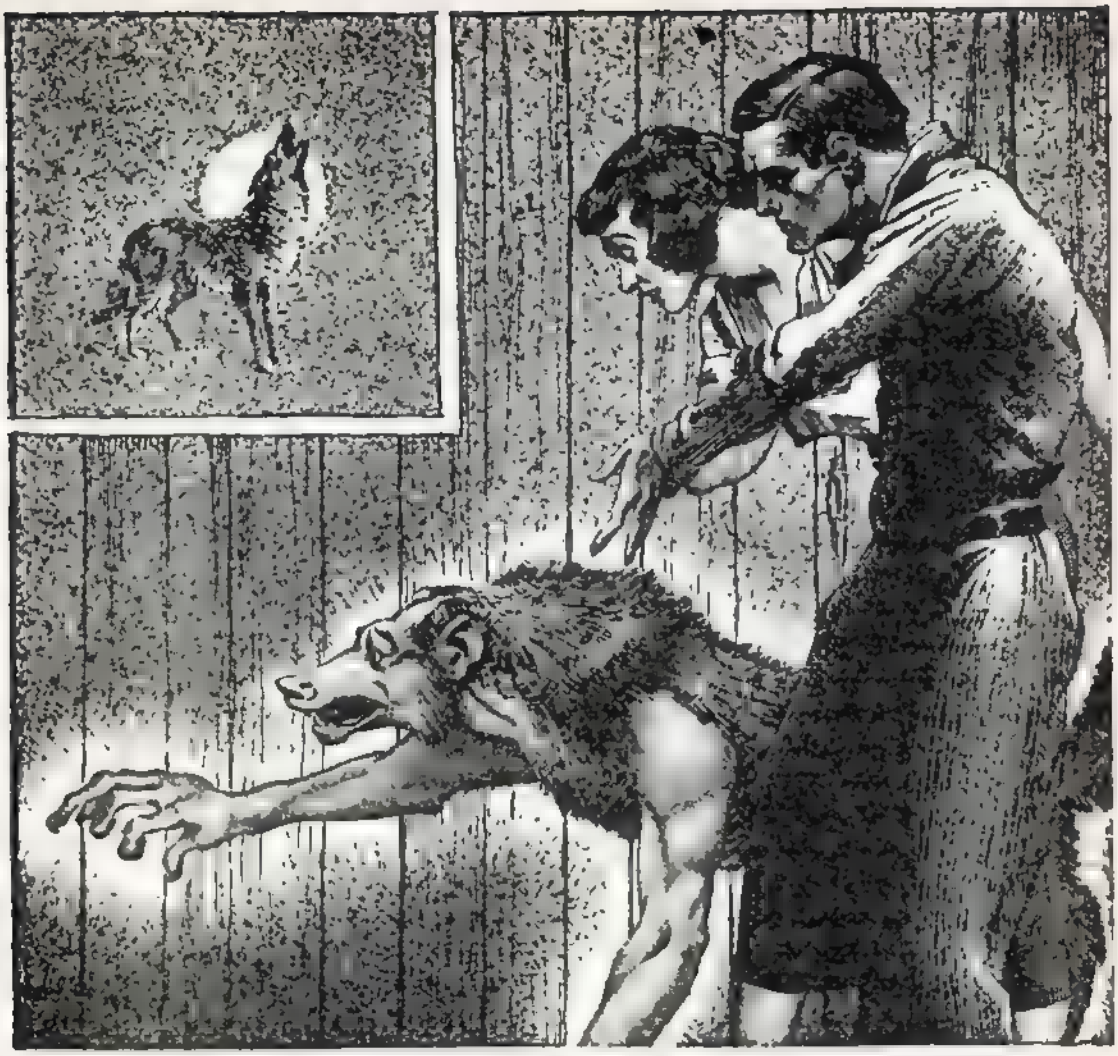
But before Leslie could swing into the saddle, Doña Maria caught him by the arm.

"Oh, Don Bart—I was too frightened and dazed to realize, last night, what a horrible fate you saved me from—that your shot made the beast drop me——"

And before Leslie could think of a suitable Spanish assurance to the effect that it was less than nothing, Maria's arms encircled his neck, and her lips sought his mouth.

"Holy smoke, Maria!" he finally gasped, catching his breath. "One more like that—anyway, your brother——"

"Theenk nothing of it, Don Bart," assured Hernandez. "Eef there is any chance that thees weel become a habit, I weel continue looking the other way, and ride like wan hell to the house to equip the excellent Señora Gomez weeth a blindfold."



"A man, doomed to assume the shape of a savage wolf."

The Woman at Loon Point

By AUGUST W. DERLETH and MARK SCHORER

What was that snarling thing that growled and cowered in the lonely lodge in the woods, guarded by a hysterical girl, as the long howl of a timber wolf sounded outside in the forest?

I MET Laramie Shaw not long after my arrival at my father's hunting-lodge at the base of Loon Point in Upper Michigan last autumn. Three days after, to be exact. Even before that, I had heard that long-deserted Loon Lodge was inhabited, and the natives of Lacroit village, south of my father's cabin, had spoken of the Shaws—"that Laramie, who walks as if she's scared of something,"

and "that young man, Jim, who's gettin' sicker and sicker instead of better, as he ought." And they spoke of how the Shaws had never been seen either hunting or fishing, but kept to their lodge, where they had been ever since spring. The inhabitants of Loon Lodge were, in fact, a local mystery.

I had been walking along the shore of the Point most of that afternoon, and admit hoping I might meet at least one of the Shaws. I had kept to the fairly well-defined path leading along the lake shore, and had stepped off it only for a few moments to examine a dead bird on the beach, when I heard quick footsteps behind me. I swung around and saw the girl coming out of the forest. She caught sight of my movement and stopped, instinctively taking a step backward. Her eyes were dark and startled and filled with sudden fear. Her cheeks were flushed with the wind, but the rest of her face, except for her large and brooding mouth, was astonishingly pale. She wore an old hunting-jacket, and beneath this a plain black dress, the skirt of which was flapping around her legs in the wind. In an instant her eyes dropped, the fear went out of them, and she passed me without a nod, despite my raising my cap to her. I watched her until she vanished around a bend not far away.

Why had she been afraid?

That night I went into the village to find out more about the Shaws. But my intentions were side-tracked by a topic which, though it had been current for some time, was still far more important to the natives gathered in the village store than the slight mystery of the Shaws.

For some time the villagers had been aware of a wolf in the vicinity. Though the animal had appeared but seldom, it had made several efforts to attack different natives. It had been shot at, of course, and though one woodsman swore that he had wounded the beast, it had been seen loping about subsequent to the shot. Wolves had long been uncommon in northern Michigan, and for years in the immediate past no wolf had been seen near Lacroit. The occasion for the recurrence of this oft-discussed topic that evening was the report that a hunter had spied the beast the previous night on Loon Point, had, indeed, heard it howl, and had shot at it before it had made off into the underbrush. Only when the villagers had talked themselves out was I able to introduce the topic of the Shaws.

But if they had been disappointed in my inability to contribute anything to their wolf-lore, I was much more so in the scant information they were able to give me. No one knew where the Shaws had come from, though the majority of them thought Chicago. They had arrived in late April, both in good health and excellent spirits, and had taken the lodge for two months, meaning to return to the city at the end of that time. It was the girl who had started the story of the wolf's presence by arriving in the village one morning early for a doctor, saying that her brother, who had left Loon Lodge just before dawn, had been attacked and severely lacerated by a wolf. The doctor later admitted that the young man had certainly been bitten by an animal of some kind.

From that time on the boy was seen no more, though before that he had been out quite often, usually alone, but sometimes with a tramp-like individual who apparently lived some distance along the isolated coast above Loon Point. The girl came into Lacroit only when it was absolutely necessary, and struck everyone as looking afraid—glancing over her shoulder all the time, in a strained way, and nervous. When the two months had passed, Laramie Shaw had appeared in Lacroit and had taken Loon Lodge indefi-

nitely. That was the substance of what I learned.

Yet I was curiously disturbed by the concluding aside of the storekeeper's wife —"Thet Shaw girl used to whistle and sing all the time—now she don't. She don't even smile like she used to. I c'n tell you it ain't a small thing 'll make a woman change like that."

When I left Lacroit that night, my mind was filled with thoughts of the Shaws. The chill autumn wind was whistling through the Point's tall pines, and not far away the loons laughed weirdly from the lake. I was in a hurry to reach my lodge, now that darkness had come down in earnest. The distance I had to travel was two miles, and I had gone over three-fourths of the way, when I heard behind me the distinct sound of footsteps. Could—my heart leaped unaccountably—could Laramie Shaw have been out, in the village, perhaps? I stopped to wait. Immediately the footsteps stopped, but not before I had heard them more distinctly. At the same moment I felt myself warned by blind instinct to press on, and my momentary hearing of the walker behind me acquainted me with the fact that it was no human being that followed; for the footsteps were padding, stealthy, and slunk through the dry leaves like those of some predatory beast.

I turned and ran wildly for the lodge, which was still lost in the blackness ahead. I think that perhaps the thing that saved me was the presence of a screened veranda; for I had no sooner flung myself beyond the screen than I saw two eyes glaring balefully at me from the path I had just quitted, and when I lit one of my lamps and held it aloft, I saw the clearly outlined figure of a gigantic wolf staring at me from immediately beyond the enclosing screen! As I watched, it turned and slunk away into the woods.

Next morning the wolf had taken a secondary place in my mind, and the Shaws had again come forward. If my curiosity must be satisfied, why not go boldly to Loon Lodge and declare myself a recent neighbor come to introduce himself? Certainly that seemed much the best plan.

Consequently, I walked to the end of the Point that morning. But I knocked on the door of Loon Lodge in vain; for no one answered. I was certain that one of the heavy curtains which still strangely covered the windows moved a little, as though someone peering out had disturbed it. Accordingly, I knocked louder; still no one replied. I went home more curious than before.

That night, which was overcast by lowering clouds driven across the sky by a booming wind, I determined to force a meeting with the Shaws. The restlessness to which I had been a prey since my futile visit of the morning had grown so that sleep was out of the question. The book I tried to read failed to hold my interest; I was thinking of Laramie Shaw and her frightened eyes, and I saw her face on every page I read. I gave up at last, and set out for Loon Lodge.

The curtains were drawn over the windows of the lodge at the end of the Point, but I could see that a light burned in the cabin; for the curtains were frequently broken by slits and tiny holes through which light glowed. I moved carefully forward, intending to take the Shaws by surprize with a sudden assault upon their door. But as I passed a window I paused. There might be no harm in looking momentarily into the room, for if I rapped, the light might be put out and I might go again unanswered.

I stooped down and looked into the room through a rent in the curtain—and

had to clutch at the window-ledge to keep from falling back in amazement at what I saw within.

Laramie Shaw was standing in the center of the room, disheveled and distraught, and before her was an animal chained to one wall. For an instant I took the animal to be a large and shaggy police dog, and then I saw and recognized it for what it actually was—*a huge timber wolf!*

I felt immediately that there was something deeply wrong about what I saw. The brute's slavering fangs, its struggles to escape from the binding cords and chain were harmless; for the chain was of steel and the cord was extremely stout. It was as I looked at the rope that I saw how peculiarly the animal was bound—its forelegs tied securely to its chest, the rope having been twisted round and round the body, though surprizingly loose, despite its secureness; its hind legs stretched out and tied together, free of its body. The position in which this manner of binding left the animal was more than strange, but even more amazing was the patent fact that somehow this ferocious beast had been taken alive—and by a woman aided solely by a sick brother!

Abruptly I thought of Jim Shaw. He was not in the room. And if he were sleeping elsewhere in the cabin, surely it was only a miracle that the disturbance made by the brute had not awakened him.

Laramie Shaw stepped suddenly away from the beast, and leaned weakly against the table. Her face came into sight, and I saw that her eyes were still haunted by that strange look of fear I had first seen in the forest. But I saw also a look of repugnance that was not loathing, and a distinct suggestion of pity for the animal at her feet.

The wolf stirred and began to struggle violently.

At that moment a sound from the blackness of the surrounding forest broke into my puzzled thoughts, cutting through the still weirdly recurring laughter of the loons on the lake. It was the call of a timber wolf, a long drawn-out howl echoing through the woods, and from inside Loon Lodge came a feeble answer.

I bent again and looked through the rent in the curtain. I saw the wolf straining futilely at the binding cords. Laramie Shaw stood for a moment waiting; then she slumped into a chair and put her head in her hands. Her shoulders began to shudder—she was weeping!

The call of the wolf sounded again from the forest. I stood for a moment undecided. If the beast threatened to attack me I had an ideal excuse for getting into Loon Lodge, but I might be forced to break my way in. I had little time to consider, however, for the wolf was rapidly coming nearer, though I could now tell that it was approaching from the opposite side of the lodge. Abruptly I dodged away from the cabin and found the path, along which I ran, hoping that the animal would not follow.

Its cries receded into the distance, and I gathered that the animal was still at Loon Lodge. Could it be its mate that the Shaws had caught?

I HAD almost reached my cabin, still running easily along the path, when I tripped and went sprawling. For a moment I lay motionless; then I turned cautiously and lit my cigarette-lighter. I had tripped over the recently killed carcass of a rabbit. Its throat had been ripped open and its blood had evidently been drunk by the killer; for there were but few drops on the leaves covering the path. I thought at once of a weasel, but certainly no weasel would have ripped open the rabbit's throat as this had been torn. Was it possible that the wolf had paused on its way

to Loon Lodge to kill this rabbit? But wolves, I knew, eat their kill.

I went on to my lodge, now doubly welcome after the strange experience I had undergone.

Despite my original intention of airing the Loon Lodge mystery in Lacroit next day, I said nothing about what I had seen. After a short stay in the village, I made my way back along the trail into the forest. I had gone perhaps half the distance to my lodge when I saw before me on the path an emaciated-looking man. He was obviously waiting for me, since he kept his eyes fixed on me.

As I came closer, I saw that he was shabbily dressed, though it was apparent that his clothes had at one time been good. His face held me—deep, black eyes, somehow seeming afire, pale mouth, bloodless cheeks, long stubble on his chin and neck, a heavy mustache on his upper lip. He took a step toward me as I came on, and I saw that he walked with a slight limp.

"I believe you're the young man who has the lodge at the base of the Point?" he said curtly, as I came up to him.

"I'm Jack Durfrey, yes," I said.

"I want a word with you," he went on. His voice had a suggestion of menace in it.

"Walk along?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It'll take only a moment," he went on. "I've seen you about Loon Lodge, and I happen to know that your attentions are unwelcome to the young lady there. I'll thank you to keep away from the Shaws' cabin hereafter."

For a moment I saw red. I controlled myself with an effort and shot back, "You? Who the devil are you to give orders to me?"

"My name," he said in a flat, disdainful voice, "is Henri Letellier. And that doesn't mean anything to you—and won't, unless I find you near Loon Lodge again."

What prevented me from striking out immediately I don't know. Before I could reply, Letellier had stepped back into the dense undergrowth fringing the trail. I took a tentative step forward, thought better of it, and went on my way, in mounting anger.

Almost at once after my return to my cabin, I made my way to Loon Lodge and hid myself in the dense bushes around the clearing in which the lodge stood. The cabin was still tightly closed, but a thin trail of smoke ascending from the chimney gave evidence of life.

I HAD not long to wait, for suddenly the door opened and a thin young man emerged into the sunlight. He was wearing trousers and an old dressing-gown, which was swinging open. His face was pale and bloodless, and his lips were unhealthily gray. His eyes were dark and shone in such a fashion that I could not doubt that he was seriously ill. He stood for a moment leaning against the house, leaving the door ajar. Then he began to move around the lodge, and in a few moments he was lost to sight behind the building.

Then the door swung wide again, and Laramie Shaw came out. She looked much as she had looked the day before, except that she seemed more wan, and her eyes seemed darker. The morning wind from the lake blew at her black hair, which fell straight to her shoulders. With a slight intake of breath I noticed how beautiful she was. She stood looking uneasily around her, then suddenly called in a low, quavering voice, "Jim! Oh, Jim!"

The young man came from behind the cabin, and the expression of relief on Laramie Shaw's face was immediate. She looked uneasily around, past him, her

eyes embracing the encroaching woods; then she stood aside until her brother entered the cabin again. She followed him.

I crouched in hiding for a few moments more. Then I ventured into the clearing and approached the cabin. There was no reply to my assault on the door of Loon Lodge, but I saw the curtains quiver and knew that I was being watched.

For some time I stood undecided on the stoop, not only mystified but also slightly angered; then I doubled back and hid once more in the dense foliage, where I sat and watched the lodge.

It was some time before Laramie Shaw appeared. She opened the door cautiously and looked out across the clearing. For a few moments she stood framed in the doorway, her head thrown back, her eyes still suspicious. Then she went quickly around to the side of the lodge and began to gather kindling wood.

I left my hiding-place and strode rapidly across to the cabin. Before the woman had time to start, I stood waiting, and there was no escape for her then. Slowly, rather thoughtfully, she advanced toward the door, a query on her face.

"You're Miss Shaw?" I asked.

She nodded and looked at me without emotion, waiting.

"I'm Jack Durfrey, your nearest neighbor."

"Yes," she said.

She was obviously reluctant to talk. I waited insistently, determined that she would speak to me. Presently I said, "I've been up to call before. Perhaps you were out, but I don't think so. If it had not been for someone who's apparently your guardian rather rudely warning me away from this place, I wouldn't have come again."

Suddenly she took interest. She looked sharply at me. "Guardian," she repeated. "Was it——?" Her face paled, suddenly, inexplicably.

"Henri Letellier," I said. "That's what he called himself."

She stepped back, dropping the wood she had gathered. For a moment I thought she was going to faint. A low moan escaped her lips. In a moment she had composed herself and was facing me again, defiantly.

Then I tried direct attack. "I want to help you, Miss Shaw," I said.

"What do you mean?" she asked immediately. "I'm not—we're not in need of help—I don't think you've a right to presume that."

I looked hard into her eyes, and she was almost immediately disconcerted.

"I want you to tell me a few things," I went on, "and perhaps I can help."

At this she was definitely disturbed and made an effort to get past me. I caught her arm.

"I saw you last night," I said abruptly.

A cry broke from her lips. She stood away at arm's length, her free hand covering her mouth. Her eyes were wide with unmistakable terror. With an effort she forced the fear from her eyes, brought her hand from her mouth, and attempted to smile.

"I don't think you could have seen me," she said in a low voice.

"Try to believe me," I said gently. "I saw you in your cabin with a bound wolf."

She could not disguise her fright, and yet attempted to laugh, succeeding only in sounding hysterical.

"Both my brother and I went to bed early last night," she said.

"I saw through a rent in the curtain," I persisted.

An angry flush crossed her face. "Go away, please," she said.

"Very well," I said, "but I'll return tonight—and shoot any wolf I see, whether inside the cabin or not."

A torrent of words fell from her lips.

"No, no, please! You must not come back here again. Oh, it may be true—no, no, what am I saying? Of course it isn't true, it can't be! But there's a wolf in the forest. I've heard him. You must not be out when he runs. Promise me you won't come back here."

Her voice had gone low, husky, almost sobbing. Tears stood in her eyes. For a moment her emotion disconcerted me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "If you sincerely believe I can't help you, I won't come back."

I heard her breathe an almost inaudible "Thank you," and saw her disappear inside, closing the door behind her.

DESPITE my promise, I did return to the cabin that night. It had been dark for more than an hour when I arrived at Loon Lodge, but a light glowed from behind the curtains drawn over the windows. I went at once to the closest window, and discovered that the rent through which I had looked into the lodge on the previous night had been repaired. Indeed, all the curtains had been carefully sewed and patched. Laramie Shaw obviously did not intend to allow me a second sight of what happened at night in the cabin.

But I heard the growling and struggling of the bound wolf inside; so I knew that it was there.

On the homeward path I heard again the call of the other wolf coming from the direction of Loon Lodge.

The next night there was a full moon. I took up my watch again, but once more failed utterly to learn anything new and was driven to my lodge by the approach of the other animal and my carelessness in bringing an unloaded weapon with me.

On the next two nights my watch was equally futile. But on the third night after the full moon, there was a slight change. The wolf was in the cabin, but not once did it cry out, not once did it struggle to escape. The wolf that haunted the surrounding forest called from afar, making no attempt to approach Loon Lodge. After that, the imprisoned animal became more and more quiet.

During this time, I saw nothing of the Shaws. I tried once again to call, but my knocks went unanswered. Nevertheless, I continued to watch the cabin, and as a result I discovered that the wolf inside became most violent in the week of the full moon, a violence common to all animals.

Eventually I gave up, though the mystery that brooded over the Shaws lingered in my mind and irritated me by its presence. November had come, and soon I would be leaving again for home.

And then one day, in answer to a furious pounding on my front door shortly after the noon hour, I opened it on Laramie Shaw and looked into her frightened eyes. At once she brushed past me, and closed the door and latched it. Then she turned and faced me, her back to the door, her eyes wild and afraid.

"I've come," she said, jerkingly. "You were the only one I could go to. I've stood it so long—I can't any more."

I saw that she was on the verge of collapse, and pushed forward a chair into which I urged her. Her face was the color of chalk. Her hands were clasped in her lap, her fingers twining together and together.

"I want to do anything I can to help you," I said.

SHE did not answer at once. She closed her eyes and leaned back; for an instant I thought she had fainted. But she had not; for presently, with visible effort, she forced herself to tell me of the horrible thing that was making her life a torture.

"Those things you said you saw in our

lodge," she began slowly. "They were true. I don't know how to explain them."

She paused and looked helplessly at me. Then she began, at a different point, her voice hysterically hurried.

"We came here on a vacation. We had planned to stay for two months. Not long after our arrival, Jim made the acquaintance of an elderly man whom he met in the woods. Though not very well dressed, this man—you saw him, you told me he had warned you away from us—Henri Letellier, was intelligent and interesting. He had led a long life of vagabondage, and his narratives held Jim.

"One night we asked him into the lodge for supper with us. He ate nothing but meat, and as the meal progressed he got more and more nervous, and began to look around as if suspicious of something. His conduct alarmed me, and even Jim took notice. Then suddenly, just as the sun was setting, he jumped up and ran from the house without a word of explanation. We were astounded, and naturally Jim went after him.

"Before Jim returned, night had set in, and a moon was glowing above the trees fringing the clearing. And then—with Jim nowhere in sight—I heard the unmistakable howl of a timber wolf from somewhere in the immediate vicinity! Only a split second later I heard Jim crashing through the underbrush, coming toward the lodge. I don't know what I feared, but I ran back into the cabin for Jim's gun.

"Only Providence could have caused me to do that; for when I got outside again, I saw Jim being flung to the ground under the attack of a gigantic timber wolf. I fired and missed, afraid of hitting Jim. But my shot didn't frighten the brute away. It slashed Jim cruelly, dangerously close to his neck. Then I fired again, and that time I struck it—in the leg, I think; for it jumped away and vanished in the forest in a moment.

"I ran to him. He lay moaning on the ground where he had been thrown. I got him into the lodge and bathed the wound and dressed it. Then I went for a doctor. He came and dressed Jim's wound anew, but seemed so incredulous about the scanty details I gave him that we didn't call him again. Fortunately, Jim seemed to be resting easily; so there was no need for the doctor again. Toward morning he developed a strange fever and became restless. I was anxious, and became still more so when after a little while he began to make odd, delirious sounds. I bent to listen, and—oh, how can I tell it?—they were animal sounds, unhuman, guttural sounds, and even as I recognized them, there came from Jim's throat what was unmistakably *the low whine of an animal in pain!*"

She paused and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, I can't go on," she sobbed, "I can't—it's so horrible, so unbelievable—you'll think I'm mad."

"Please go on," I said in the most persuasive voice I could summon. I made no move to comfort her, feeling instinctively that she might resent it.

She looked up. "Perhaps you've guessed the frightful thing that happened. That man—Letellier—is a werewolf—a man doomed to become a beast at sundown, doomed to assume the shape of a savage wolf, a beast whose nourishment is the blood of animals and human beings! And his bite was so venomous, so accursed, that it had contaminated Jim, so that Jim, too, must inevitably change and become as Letellier!"

She looked at me with defiant eyes.

"Go on," I said in a tense voice. I did not want her to see any evidence of the turmoil in my mind. I had fleetingly thought that something had unsettled her

mind; but too soon I saw that everything I had seen fitted into this inconceivable tale she was relating. Yet I could not easily believe.

"Jim knew," she went on. "He knew what to expect; for he had been transformed into a werewolf completely—he knew of the terrible blood-lust that would come over him, knew that soon a nightly change of form would begin. He knew that somehow blood from Letellier's veins had entered his own, thus binding him to Letellier. And he felt that if he could be kept from tasting blood in any form for a long time, the spell would be weakened and broken.

"It was at Jim's demand that I tied and chained him the next night—and every night after." She shuddered. "I didn't want to do it, but Jim insisted. I can't describe my horror and loathing at the sight of the slow change that came over him that night—how before my eyes my brother became a savage beast!"

For a few moments she sat in silence that I did not break.

"He was worst in the week of the full moon," she began again. "Then the blood-lust in his veins was strongest, and I had the most difficult time with him. It's the sixth month, now. Up to this time Letellier has appeared only on moonlit nights and howled for Jim just beyond the clearing. Jim says that if he can be shot and killed, the spell will be lifted from him by Letellier's death. I tried once or twice to shoot him, but he avoids me—and I'm not a good shot.

"I came to you, because today Letellier surprized me at the lodge—and threatened me. He knows that Jim is escaping him, and that I'm helping him. If I continue, he means to waylay me either when I go to Lacroit, or when I get water or wood. Before this he never came, though I saw him once by day shortly after he had attacked Jim in his nocturnal form. He was limping. I think my bullet caused that limp. That offers definite proof that bullets can and do affect these creatures. At least, a bullet can kill their bodies—but Jim says that it must be a silver bullet to free the evil spirit that animates Letellier. Will you help me?"

Once more she was on the verge of hysteria.

"You and I will do it together," I said.

"Thank you," she said simply.

"I'm going back to Loon Lodge with you at once," I went on, "and when I know you're safe inside, I'm going to Lacroit and have silver bullets made."

Our journey back to Loon Lodge was rapid, for Laramie Shaw was worried about Jim, not knowing how much power Letellier might have over him by day. But Jim was safe. I left at once for Lacroit, warning Laramie under no conditions to leave the house, for since Letellier might have seen me and guessed that she had sought help, he might lie in wait for her at once.

The hour I spent in the village was nerve-racking. I could not help thinking of Laramie's danger, fearing that she might be drawn from the lodge despite my warning. And my fear for her safety was tinged by an entirely different emotion which the first sight of Laramie Shaw had implanted in my mind.

An old locksmith had no difficulty in making the bullets which were to fit into my pistol, the weapon I could use with the greatest degree of accuracy.

November dusk was threatening from the other side of the lake when I made my way along the shore, and already the early moon had risen. I ran, to reach Loon Lodge before night, but my haste was needless; for the sun was still lingering on the horizon when I emerged into the clearing. As I approached the lodge I

saw from the corner of one eye that someone was lurking in the bushes beyond, but as I spun around to look, he vanished. At the same moment, Laramie, who had seen me coming, threw open the door and with a glad cry ran out toward me.

I ran to her, took her arm almost roughly, and retreated into the cabin. "Someone in the bushes," I warned.

"I know," she said recklessly; "it's Letellier. He's been here ever since you left for Lacroit."

Jim sat in a low chair near the table. He was even paler than he had been when I had seen him a month before. Indeed, he seemed to be in the last stages of some incurable disease.

"Jim, this is Jack Durfrey. He's got the lodge at the base of the Point. He knows, and he's come to help."

Jim put out a weak, uncertain hand, muttering, "Glad to know you."

As I spoke to him, the sun slipped below the horizon, and abruptly, to my horror, a change came over Jim Shaw. He seemed to shrivel, to shrink back against the chair. His head appeared to lengthen, his hair became coarse, and on his shrinking hands appeared a grayish-black mat of hair. His clothes dropped from him. At the same instant a wolf howled from the dusk beyond the lodge.

Then I jerked open the door and fired at the skulking figure in the encroaching shadows. I missed, for the wolf that was Letellier vanished into the underbrush.

I heard Laramie's frightened cry behind me and whirled to see Jim, her brother, a wild animal, snarling and unbound, free for the first time. In the excitement of my coming, Laramie had forgotten to bind him! But, fortunately for both of us, the animal could not throw off the physical weakness of the man, and the wolf was accordingly handicapped. Again came a threatening howl from outside.

I had left the door standing partly open, an act of carelessness for which both Laramie and I might have paid with our souls. It was Laramie's warning cry that saved us. I turned just in time. For the wolf that was Letellier, seeing that Jim was unbound, that the door was open and our backs turned, had run swiftly across the clearing, and was launching itself at me even as I turned. I fired blindly, closing my eyes.

I think no sound was ever more welcome to my ears than the sound of the wolf's body crashing to the earth. With an effort I swung the door to and backed up against it.

I heard Laramie's low cry of joy, and in another moment witnessed the amazing transformation from wolf to man that brought Jim Shaw once more into human shape, a slow, horrible process, suggestive of long-lost, age-old horror.

Then Laramie Shaw sought my arms.

LARAMIE has since become my wife.

I admit that at first I had had doubts about her sanity, despite the way in which facts as I knew them fitted into her explanation. But all doubts I had were lost when Jim and I stepped from the lodge later that night to bury the thing that lay just beyond the door. For, though I had clearly shot a timber wolf, the thing we buried was the body of the man who called himself Henri Letellier!

The Album

By AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG

The story of a strange and direful doom that lurked within the pages of an old book, bound in human skin

IT WAS Murray who first discovered the album, in the musty back room of the second-hand book-shop. It was tucked away next to a moldy copy of Paracelsus on the top shelf, and would have escaped notice entirely had not a beam from the dusty electric light bulb glinted on a rubbed place on the brass bands that bound it.

"Hello! What's this?" Murray exclaimed aloud, and lifted it down.

Fenwick and O'Hara, who had been browsing through the shelves behind him, turned at the sound of his voice.

"It looks like an old photograph album," Fenwick observed, glancing over Murray's shoulder. "How ever do you suppose it got mixed up with these old books on magic and superstition?"

"Take it in your hand," Murray invited. An odd expression had come into his face.

Fenwick obeyed, but almost dropped it.

"It's heavier than it looks," he remarked, recovering it. Then his expression changed, as Murray's had done.

"What ails the thing?" he demanded. "It feels as if—here, O'Hara; you take it. See if you notice anything."

O'Hara took the book in his hand, and weighed it experimentally.

"It is heavy for the size of it," he commented. "But what——" A grayish pallor overspread his face, and he thrust the book back at Murray.

"Divil an' all!" he cried. "The thing crawled under my fingers!"

Murray grinned appreciatively.

"It must be the stuff it's bound in makes it feel that way," he speculated. He carried it nearer to the single electric light, in order to examine it better. "It looks like some kind of soft, whitish leather."

"Put it away," O'Hara said, wiping his hands upon his handkerchief. "I don't like the feel of it."

Murray was in the act of complying, but on sudden impulse checked himself. "May as well see what's in the thing," he murmured, and undid the brass clasps. Fenwick and O'Hara, fascinated in spite of themselves, drew near again.

The inside of the book, instead of being made of the usual heavily enameled paper, was composed of sheets of wood planed to almost paper-thinness, and varnished and polished so that the grain of the wood was brought out in a most pleasing manner. The photographs were inserted in the ordinary way.

The first picture was a daguerreotype of so early a date that it was faded almost away; and it was only by holding the page sidewise that the three men were able to distinguish its subject, a young man in the full stock and knee-breeches of the late Eighteenth Century. Unlike the ordinary subject of that early period of the photographer's art, his expression was neither stony nor wooden, but was animated by a kind of incredulous sur-

prize, that was intense and vital even after a lapse of more than a hundred years.

"Odd-looking chap," Murray commented, and flipped over the page.

The second picture brought to view a woman of early middle age, whose costume indicated a period some fifteen or twenty years later than that represented by the man. She bore no physical resemblance to him that might have indicated a blood relationship, but her features were stamped with that same expression of startled incredulity that distinguished his.

Murray leafed through several more pages. There was a young girl of the eighteen-forties; a Confederate soldier; a gentleman of the post-Civil War period. And on all of their faces was that identical expression of incredulous surprize.

"There's something strange about the lot of them," Fenwick observed thoughtfully. "Wasn't that an index or something scratched on the fly-leaf?"

While Murray held the book, he turned back the stiff wooden pages to the blank one immediately inside the top cover. But it was not an index that had been scratched into the varnished surface of the wood:

"*'To Whosoever may open this Booke,'*" Murray read aloud. "*'Be it set down here as a Warning to you, Sir or Madame, that ye open this Booke at no Point beyond that whereat is placed the red ribbon Booke-Mark. Better still were it should ye throw the entire Booke, unopened, into the Flames; but this I cannot hope that ye will do, being unable to accomplish it myself. But I do most earnestly adjure you that ye look no Place beyond the red Ribbon, lest ye lose yourselves to this Worlde, Bodie & Soule; for it is a veritable Tomb for the Living.'*"

The message was unsigned.

Murray glanced at his two companions.

"Shall we?" he inquired, fingering the wisp of faded red ribbon that dangled from the middle of the volume before the picture of a World War soldier.

Fenwick was about to nod assent; then a quizzical expression appeared about the corners of his mouth.

"Wait a bit," he counseled. "Let's buy the thing and take it along. Then we'll all meet somewhere tonight, and open it at twelve o'clock. We'll make a real ceremony of it, and defy the curse."

Murray's eyes lighted up with enthusiasm.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "And since I discovered the book, we'll meet at my diggings. But see to it that you're both there by midnight; for I won't wait."

O'Hara looked doubtful, but said nothing.

2

O'Hara glanced at his watch as he turned in at Murray's door. Just five minutes to twelve. He had not meant to cut it so fine; but at least he had arrived before the appointed hour.

A voice behind him made him turn. Fenwick was coming up the stairs in back of him.

"Glad to see I'm not the only one," Fenwick said. "I had engine trouble; what made you late?"

"Late?" O'Hara repeated. "We've still got five minutes."

"Your watch must be run down," Fenwick told him. He brought out his own watch. Its hands stood at a quarter past twelve.

"No chance that Murray's waited for us, I suppose," O'Hara said uneasily. He had an unaccountable feeling of having failed in some vital emergency.

"Well, it couldn't be helped." Fenwick shrugged philosophically. "But, at least, he's bound to let us see his treasure."

He raised his hand and rapped sharply upon the outer door. There was no answer.

Fenwick waited a minute or so, then repeated his knock, this time a trifle louder. Again there was no answer save a hollow echo from the otherwise silent rooms beyond.

"What the deuce!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Is he dead in there?"

"Don't say that," O'Hara muttered nervously. "I don't like it."

Fenwick glanced at him quickly, but made no comment.

"I'm going in," he declared when a third knock had failed to bring any response. "If he's gone out a minute on some errand, he'll expect us to do that."

The door swung open under his hand; and followed by O'Hara, he stepped into the silent hall.

Through an open doorway ahead of them, a light flickered in grotesque dance. Fenwick and O'Hara followed its lurid beckonings into the room beyond.

A fire had been lighted in the fireplace; and it was the undulation of its flames that had sent the flickering light into the hall. The large reading-lamp upon the library table had not been lighted, for the fire furnished sufficient illumination for ordinary purposes; although it left the corners of the large room filled with hanging masses of shadow, like great bats clinging by their claws to the blackened wainscot. There was about the place an air of almost sentient expectancy, as though its regular occupant had quitted it only a minute before, and would return any instant.

FENWICK and O'Hara seated themselves in the deep armchairs on either side of the fireplace to await the return of their missing host. But five minutes lengthened into ten, and ten into twenty; and he did not appear. When a half-hour had passed, O'Hara rose and began to pace the floor restlessly, pausing occasionally to pick up and examine some object on one of the small stands scattered about the room.

The glint of metal attracted his attention, and he stopped to investigate. It was the gleam of the firelight upon the brass clasps of the album, lying unwrapped upon the library table.

O'Hara put out his hand tentatively, and although the touch of that whitish, leather-like substance revolted him, half opened the top cover. His eyes turned inquiringly to Fenwick's.

"Why not?" Fenwick rose languidly, and crossed to his side. "Apparently Murray's had his look without waiting for us; so there's no reason why we should wait any longer for him."

With a feeling of growing excitement that neither of them would have acknowledged, they began to leaf through the book; past the man of over a hundred years ago, past the young woman of the 'forties, past the dozen or so others until they came to the World War soldier, at whose page the red ribbon book-mark had lain that morning.

"Murray has been tampering," Fenwick observed suddenly. "See, he has moved the book-mark."

"But only to the next page," O'Hara said.

He turned over the thin wooden leaf. An instant his glance rested upon the one that had been beneath. Then, with a startled cry, he clapped the book shut.

Fenwick's eyes flickered. Without a word, he took the book from O'Hara's trembling hands, and reopened it at the place where the ribbon now lay.

Staring up at him with the same expression of incredulous surprize that had characterized the subjects of all the other photographs, was the face of the missing Murray!

Fenwick looked at O'Hara, who looked back at him with questioning apprehension. Suddenly a formless darkness seemed to dim the ruddy glow of the firelight, while an arctic chill permeated the air. The undulating shadows crept nearer.

"Let's get out of here," O'Hara muttered thickly, and started toward the door.

Fenwick followed.

3

FENWICK and O'Hara faced each other across the restaurant table. In the faces of both were fine lines that had not been there two weeks before.

"He's been gone ten days now," O'Hara observed, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

Fenwick nodded. "And no trace of him has been found," he said.

"Nor will there be," O'Hara declared with conviction; then he added, "He has lost himself to this world."

Fenwick's keen glance flew searchingly to his companion's face. He offered no comment, but his hand clenched involuntarily upon the table-cloth. O'Hara saw the gesture.

"Oh, why go on denying it to each other?" he cried. His voice rose to a pitch approaching hysteria. "The book got Murray; we both know it did. And it will get us too unless we destroy it!"

"Steady, old man," Fenwick counseled, but his own voice was tight under its calm. "If it's finding Murray's picture in the album that's worrying you, put your mind at rest. Placing it there was just one of his silly ideas of humor. He left us alone with the mysterious volume, in order to work our curiosity to fever-pitch. Then, when we couldn't resist the temptation any longer, we opened it—to find his photograph on the forbidden page, just as he had intended that we should. Why, at this very minute, he is probably——"

"It was no joke," O'Hara interrupted. He was speaking rapidly, almost incoherently. "If it had been, he'd have come back long ago; he'd never have let it go so far. But he hasn't come back because he *can't* come back. I tell you *the book got him!*"

Fenwick was silent for several minutes. When he finally spoke, it was with a kind of grim decision.

"Very well," he said. "If you feel that way about it, we'll get the book and destroy it. Meet me at Murray's place at ten o'clock tonight."

4

FENWICK glanced impatiently at his watch, then slipped it back into his pocket and resumed his restless pacing of the floor. What in the devil, he asked himself for the twentieth time, could be keeping O'Hara? They had agreed to meet here in Murray's room at ten o'clock; and it was now nearly eleven.

He paused beside the library table where the book lay, and looked down at it; but he did not touch it. Not that he had any ridiculous superstitions about it, of course; but—hang it all!—there *was* something disquieting about the blasted thing, and the way he found himself wanting to finger that soft, repulsive stuff in which it was bound. What was it the stuff reminded him of? It wasn't leather; it was more like—like—good Lord!—it was like human flesh!

The too apt simile gave rise in him to a feeling of revulsion, and he crossed to the fireplace and sat down in one of the armchairs. Why the devil didn't O'Hara come? He leaned back and closed his eyes. . . .

He came to with the disquieting sensation that he had been sound asleep, and

that while he slept, someone had come into the room. With a feeling of drugged sluggishness, like that of a man who had not entirely thrown off the bonds of sleep, he turned his head and peered into the shadows.

At first he could discern nothing; for the fire had burned down to a mere bed of red ashes, so that except for a little space immediately in front of the fireplace, the room was in almost complete darkness. But then he saw them, dim in the gloom; the vague blur of a woman's full-skirted white dress, and the gleam of brass buttons on a man's military uniform among the dozen or so forms that moved noiselessly about the room.

Seeing that he had observed them, several of the figures came closer to him, but not quite near enough for him to distinguish their faces clearly. Nevertheless, he was impressed by an uncanny air of familiarity about them, as though he had encountered them all somewhere before, under slightly different circumstances.

Fenwick struggled to cast off the dream-like stupor that still enveloped him, and partly succeeded.

"I must have been napping when you came in," he mumbled, wondering at himself that he was not more surprized to discover this company of people in Murray's untenanted rooms. "I—I'm sorry if I kept you waiting."

The figure of a man detached itself from the group, and came forward. It was the only one, Fenwick observed, that was not costumed in the style of an earlier day. It rested its arms across the back of his chair and stood looking down at him, as though waiting recognition.

Fenwick raised his eyes to the figure's, then sprang to his feet with a cry of astonishment.

"Murray!" he exclaimed incredulously.

Murray nodded, but did not speak. Linking his arm through Fenwick's, he led him to the table where the book lay.

Actuated by an impulse independent of his own will, Fenwick picked it up and opened the cover. It did not quiver under his hand as on former occasions, but was like the inanimate leather binding of any other book. He turned over the first page.

"This is strange," he observed to Murray. "The pictures have been removed."

Murray nodded. He seemed to be trying to convey some message to Fenwick; although for some mysterious reason he still did not speak. Almost covertly he gestured toward his shadowy companions.

Of a sudden, Fenwick realized why those others had appeared so uncannily familiar to him, and where it was that he had seen them before: *They were the people of the photographs in the album!*

Ignoring the pressure of Murray's suddenly restraining hand upon his arm, and swept along by a burning curiosity that he was powerless to resist, he leafed quickly over the now empty pages until he came to the place where the bookmark lay. He removed it, and turned the leaf. . . .

5

O'Hara stood perplexedly in the middle of Murray's empty living-room. When that slight accident to his taxi had delayed him over an hour, he had been positive that Fenwick would arrive at their rendezvous ahead of him; yet he found the place empty.

But perhaps Fenwick *had* arrived, and had gone out to look for *him*. The room had that unmistakable air of recent occupancy. . . .

The fire had burned itself down to a mere bed of red ashes, leaving the room

almost in darkness. O'Hara crossed to the library table, and switched on the reading-lamp. Its light glinted upon the brass clasps of the album.

Fighting down the feeling of nausea that the touch of it aroused in him, O'Hara opened its cover, and turned over the first page. There was the daguerreotype of the man in the knee-breeches, and beyond him that of the middle-aged woman.

Mechanically O'Hara turned the leaves until he came to the one containing the picture of Murray. He caught his breath with a sharp, hissing sound.

"So!" he exclaimed aloud. "Fenwick *has* been here. And he's moved the bookmark one page forward!"

A moment he hesitated; then, his heart beating with a strange excitement, he turned over the page and glanced fearfully down.

Staring up at him with the same expression of incredulous surprize that had characterized all the others, was the pictured face of Fenwick!

The Theater Upstairs

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A weird and uncanny story about a motion-picture show, in which dead actors and actresses flickered across the silver screen

"LOOK, a picture theater—who'd expect one here?"

Luther caught my arm and dragged me to a halt. We'd been out on a directionless walk through lower Manhattan that evening—"flitting" was Luther's word, cribbed, I think, from Robert W. Chambers. The old narrow street where we now paused had an old English name and was somewhere south and east of Chinatown. Its line of dingy shops had foreign words on their dim windows, and lights and threadbare curtains up above where their proprietors lodged. And right before us, where Luther had stopped to gaze, was a narrow wooden door that bore a white card. CINEMA, it said in bold, plain capitals. And, in smaller letters below: Georgia Wattell.

I was prepared to be embarrassed by that name. Everyone suspected, and a few claimed to know positively, that Georgia Wattell had committed suicide at the height of her Hollywood career because Luther had deserted her. But my companion did not flinch, only drew up that thick body of his. A smile wrinkled his handsome features, features that still meant box-office to any picture, even though they were softening from too much food and drink and so forth.

"Wonder which of Georgia's things it is," Luther mused, with a gayety slightly forced. "Come on, I'll stand you a show."

I didn't like it, but refusal would seem accusation. So I let him draw me through the door.

WE HAD stairs to walk up—creaky old stairs. They were so narrow that we had to mount in single file, our shoulders brushing first one wall, then the other. I was mystified, for doesn't a

New York ordinance provide that theaters cannot be on upper floors? There was no light on those stairs, as I remember, only a sort of grayness filtering from above. At any rate, we saw better when we came to the little foyer at the top. A shabby man stood there, with lead-colored eyes in his square face and a great shock of coarse gray hair.

"Admission a quarter," he mumbled in a soft, hoarse voice, and accepted the half-dollar Luther produced. "Go on in."

With one hand he pocketed the coin and with the other drew back a dark, heavy curtain. We entered a long hall, groped our way to seats—we were the only patrons, so far as I could tell—and almost at once the screen lit up with the title: THE HORLA, by Guy de Maupassant.

"Creepy stuff—good!" muttered Luther with relish, then added some other comment on the grisly classic. What with trying to hear him and read the cast of players at the same moment, I failed in both efforts. The shimmering words on the screen dissolved into a pictured landscape, smitten by rain which the sound apparatus mimicked drearily. In the middle distance appeared a cottage, squat and ancient, with a droopy, soft-seeming roof like the cap of a toadstool. The camera viewpoint sailed down and upon it, in what Luther called a "dolly shot." We saw at close quarters the front porch.

Two women sat on the top step, exchanging the inconsequential opening dialog. Georgia Wattell seated at center with her sad, dark face turned front, was first recognizable. Her companion, to one side and in profile, offered to our view a flash of silver-blond hair and a handsome, feline countenance.

"It's Lilyan Tashman," grunted Luther, and shut up his mouth with a snap. He might have said more about this uneasy vision of two dead actresses talking and moving, but he did not. A third figure was coming into view at the left, shedding a glistening waterproof and a soaked slouch hat. My first glimpse of his smooth black hair and close-set ears, seen from behind, struck a chord of memory in me. Then his face swiveled around into view, and I spoke aloud.

"This can't be!" I protested. "Why, Rudolph Valentino died before anybody even dreamed of sound pic——"

But it was Valentino nevertheless, and he had been about to speak to the two women. However, just as I exclaimed in my unbelieving amazement, he paused and faced front. His gaze seemed to meet mine, and suddenly I realized how big he was on the screen, eight or ten feet high at the least. Those brilliant eyes withered me, his lip twitched over his dazzling teeth—the contemptuous rebuke-expression of an actor to a noisy audience.

So devastatingly real was that shadowy snub that I almost fell from my seat. I know that Luther swore, and that I felt sweaty all over. When I recovered enough to assure myself that my imagination was too lively, Valentino had turned back to deliver his interrupted entrance line. The show went on.

So far there was nothing to remind me of de Maupassant's story as I had read it. But with Valentino's first speech and Georgia Wattell's answer the familiar plot began. Of course, it was freely modified, like most film versions of the classics. For one thing, the victim of the invisible monster was not a man but a woman — Georgia, to be exact — and it seemed to me at the time that this change heightened the atmosphere of helpless horror. Valentino might have done something vigorous, either spiritual or physical, against de Maupassant's Horla. Georgia Wattell, with her sorrowfully lovely face and frail little body, seemed inescapably foredoomed.

The remainder of the action on the porch was occupied by Georgia's description of the barely-understood woes she was beginning to suffer at the Horla's hands. Miss Tashman as her friend and Valentino as her lover urged her to treat everything as a fancy and to tell herself that all would be well. She promised—but how vividly she acted the part of an unbeliever in her own assurance! Then the image of the porch, with those three shadows of dead players posed upon it in attitudes of life, faded away.

THE next scene was a French country bedroom — curtained bed, *prie-dieu* and so on. Georgia Wattell entered it, unfastening her clothing.

"Ho!" exploded Luther somewhat lasciviously, but I did not stop to be disgusted with him. My mind was wrestling with the situation, how items so familiar in themselves — lower New York, the motion picture business, the performers, de Maupassant's story—could be so creepy in combination.

Well, Georgia took off her dress. I saw, as often before, that she had a lovely bosom and shoulders, for all her fragility. Over her underthings she drew an ample white robe, on the collar of which fell her loosened dark hair. Kneeling for a moment at the *prie-dieu*, she murmured a half-audible prayer, then turned toward the bed. At that moment there entered—just where, I cannot say—the Horla.

It was quite the finest and weirdest film device I have ever seen. No effect in the picture versions of *Frankenstein* or *Dracula* remotely approached it. Without outline or opacity, less tangible than a shimmer of hot air, yet it gave the impression of living malevolence. I felt aware of its presence upon the screen without actually seeing it; but how could it have been suggested without being visible? I should like to discuss this point with someone else who saw the picture, but I have never yet found such a person.

It was there, anyway. Georgia registered sudden and uneasy knowledge of it. Her body shuddered a trifle inside the robe and she paused as if in indecision, then moved toward the bed. A moment later she moaned wildly and staggered a bit. The thing, whatever triumph of photo-dramatic trickery it was, enveloped her.

She went all blurred and indistinct, as though seen through water. Doesn't de Maupassant himself use that figure of speech? Then the attacking entity seemed to pop out into a faint approach to human shape. I could see shadowy arms winding around the shrinking girl, a round, featureless head bowed as if its maw sought her throat. She screamed loudly and began to struggle. Then Valentino and Miss Tashman burst into the room.

With their appearance the Horla released her and seemed to retire into its half-intangible condition. I, who had utterly forgotten that I saw only a film, sighed my inexpressible relief at the thing's momentary defeat, then whispered to Luther.

"I don't like this," I said. "Let's get out, or I won't sleep tonight."

"We stay right here," he mumbled back, his eyes bright and fascinated as they kept focussed on the screen.

Valentino was holding Georgia close, caressing her to quiet her hysterics and speaking reassuringly in his accented English. Lilyan Tashman said something apparently meant for comedy relief, which was badly needed at this point. But neither Luther nor I laughed.

Georgia suddenly cried out in fresh fear.

"It's there in the corner!" she wailed, turning toward the spot where the Horla must be lurking.

Both her companions followed her

gaze, apparently seeing nothing. For that matter I saw nothing myself, though I well knew the thing was there.

Valentino made another effort to calm her.

"I'll put a bullet into it, darling," he offered, with an air of falling in with her morbid humor. "In the corner, you say?"

From his pocket he drew a revolver. But Georgia, suddenly calming her shudders, snatched the weapon from his hand.

"Don't!" she begged. "How can a bullet harm something that has no life like ours?"

"Here, don't point that gun at me!" begged Miss Tashman, retreating in comic fright.

Georgia moved forward in the picture, looming larger than her companions. "You can't kill spirits," she went on, tonelessly and quite undramatically. "Bullets are for *living* enemies."

She gazed out upon us.

Right here is where the whole business stopped being real and became nightmare. Georgia moved again, closer and closer, until her head and shoulders, with the gun hand lifted beside them, filled the screen. She looked as big as the Sphinx by then, but grim and merciless as no Sphinx ever was. And her enormous, accusing eyes weren't fixed upon me, but upon Luther.

My inner self began arguing silently. "That's odd," it said plaintively. "A gaze from the screen seems to meet that of each member of the audience. How can she be looking *past* me at——"

Georgia spoke, between immense, hardened lips, in a voice that rolled out to fill the whole theater:

"Jan Luther!"

And she swelled bigger, bigger beyond all reason, too big for the screen to contain. Suddenly there were only the hand and the gun, turned toward us like a cannon aimed point-blank.

Luther was on his feet, screaming.

"You can't!" he challenged wildly. "You—why, you're only a shadow!"

But the screen exploded in white light, that made the whole hall bright as day for just the hundredth part of a second. After that I was trying to hold Luther erect. He sagged and slumped back into his seat in spite of all I could do. Blood purled gently down his face from a neat round hole in his forehead.

I glanced wildly at the screen. The picture had shrunk back to ordinary dimensions now, showing again the bedroom, the three performers and everything else exactly as it had been.

Georgia was offering Valentino his pistol again. "Thanks, Rudy," she said.

I SUPPOSE I must have run crazily out of there, for my next memory is of panting the story in broken sentences to a big blue-coated policeman. He frowned as I tried to tell everything at once, then came back with me to the street with the foreign-labeled shops. When I couldn't find the door and its lettered card he laughed, not very good-naturedly, and accused me of being drunk. When I tried to argue he ordered me to move along or go to jail and sleep it off.

I haven't seen Luther since, nor heard from him. There has been plenty in the papers about his disappearance, though several editors have put it down as a publicity stunt. Three times recently I have gone into the part of town where I lost him, and each time I have seen, at a little distance along a sidewalk or across a street, the white-haired, leaden-eyed man who admitted us to the theater. But, though I always tried to hail him, he lost himself among the passers-by before I reached him.

At length I have decided to stay away from there altogether. I wish I could stop thinking about the affair as well.

It Walks by Night

By HENRY KUTTNER

A blood-chilling narrative of a ghastly horror that stalked through the crypts beneath the old graveyard

JOHANN leaned heavily against a tall obelisk of discolored marble, his fever-weakened body trembling with exhaustion. The graveyard was a dim black sea, with pale slabs and monoliths standing in irregular ranks all about him. He fumbled with the slide of his lantern and a white beam sprang out vividly, etching the man's gaunt figure in sharp detail.

Deep shadows lay in the hollows of his cheeks and beneath his dilated, smoldering eyes. His face had an angry flush which betrayed the fever blazing in his brain—fever that had burned away lifelong barriers of fear and driven him to this ancient burying-ground where few would have ventured after sundown. For, as all men knew, a horror dwelt among these tombs, an ancient horror that had come down through the generations. There were tales of a thing that walked by night among the graves; so that sometimes when men came searching in broad daylight they found new graves opened, coffins ruthlessly torn apart, and the bodies gone.

Occasionally one of the villagers would bury his kin in the cemetery at Kruschen, twenty miles to the north. But this was seldom done, since the horror had dwelt in the graveyard longer than the oldest graybeard, and a kind of hopeless apathy hung, like a somber pall, over the village. Moreover, there was a tale that, long ago, in the year of the great plague when all bodies were burned for fear of spreading the pestilence, something had come forth from among the tombs and had burst nightly into the houses on the outskirts of the village. A dozen people had vanished without a trace, and at last in desperation the plague-infected corpses had been interred in the old burying-ground. Thereafter the village slept in peace, although now and then a lone traveler or itinerant peddler would disappear, never to be seen again. Still, as the older men whispered among themselves, it was lucky that worse things did not befall.

But now Johann was driven by a fierce urge that made him disregard the ancient menace that lurked among the tombs. He had come for his wife.

Elsa, his bride for scarcely a year, had been buried while Johann lay delirious, raving with the same fever that had proved fatal to his wife. Believing him asleep, his cousin's wife had talked too freely, and Johann had learned that Elsa had been interred in the devil-haunted graveyard beyond the outskirts of the village. His beloved Elsa, daughter of the ancient Auber clan that could trace their fathers back through Thurn and Taxis—the prey of the ghoul!

Horror had lent Johann strength to leave his bed and slip unnoticed from his cousin's house, pausing only to snatch his pistol and a lantern. Now he drew the weapon from his shirt as footsteps sounded suddenly near by.

A man came into view in the starlight, gingerly picking his way among the graves. As Johann recognized Karl, his cousin, he thrust the pistol back into his

shirt and let the light from his lantern flare out. The newcomer gave a startled cry, quickly muffled.

KARL stepped into the wan splotch of light, relief plain in his pale face. "Johann! I thought—what are you doing here? You can't help Elsa now."

Johann looked away abruptly, his mouth working. Karl put a hand on his cousin's shoulder, but Johann shook it off impatiently. "It's your fault, Karl," he accused, his eyes dark with anger. "You let them bury Elsa here—in this devil-ridden place."

Karl made a placating gesture. "What could I do? I told them you would not——"

"I know." The resentment was gone from Johann's voice. It was very bitter now. "Our heads have been bowed beneath the yoke for a long time. Too long, Karl. Elsa shall not——"

"She has been buried a week now. You—you have no shovel."

It was true. Johann had had no time to procure one during his flight. He said slowly, "I can guard her grave, at any rate. You can go back to the village and get shovels."

Karl was silent. After a moment Johann laughed mirthlessly.

"Bring the shovels tomorrow, then," he jeered. "You won't be afraid to come here in daylight."

Stung, Karl responded, "It's not daylight now. Come home, Johann. We can get Elsa tomorrow. One more night won't—it's dangerous, Johann! They say the—they say it's been walking again."

Johann shrugged with a nonchalance he did not feel. He was shivering in the chill wind that blew over the neglected graves. His fears, forgotten in his delirium, were slowly creeping back to torment him; but he pushed them resolutely aside.

"I'm not afraid," he growled, and moved forward among the graves, his lantern sending out a beam of yellow light that rested on lichen-stained stone and the worm-eaten and weathered surface of wooden slabs and crosses. Once he tripped over a fallen tombstone, half buried in the ground, and would have fallen had not Karl caught him. Karl began a frantic protest which his cousin did not hear. Johann was staring intently into the gloom; he took a few hasty steps, and at his feet loomed the black gulf of an open grave.

He sent the beam of the lantern darting down into it and saw that the coffin-lid was broken and shattered, and that the sarcophagus itself was empty. Even before the light searched out the inscription upon the wooden slab at the head of the violated grave he knew what would be painted there.

Beside him Karl caught his breath in a gasp of fear. But Johann merely stood silent, swaying a little, the dank wind blowing coldly across his wet face, and his thoughts were a chaotic swirl in which horror and grief and anger were mingled. Out of his poignant grief and his horror, fierce anger racked his feverish brain with surges of red rage that shook him with their intensity. Under his shirt he felt the bulk of the pistol, and he gripped it fiercely. Elsa! Her slim white body the prey of the ghoul! Suddenly all Johann's fear was forgotten in his blinding, overwhelming anger.

Karl was tugging at his arm. He turned to meet his cousin's frightened gaze. "Johann! What are you waiting for? We can't stay here. It . . . it has walked again!"

"No!" Johann barked out the word fiercely, his eyes blazing. "Elsa——"

"It's too late, Johann! Elsa is gone."

"Is it too late for vengeance?" Johann asked quietly, and at his words Karl

shrank back, stark amazement in his face.

"Vengeance?" He whispered the word fearfully, and a shudder racked him. He shot an apprehensive glance into the dimness about them. Then he said, still whispering, "You *are* mad, Johann."

Deliberately Johann drew out his pistol. "Very well, I am mad. But . . . Karl, if it were your wife——" He broke off, his lips twitching, and when he resumed, his voice was chill with inflexible purpose. "Listen to me, Karl; I'm going to make someone—god, man or devil!—suffer for this crime!" He glanced at the black gulf of the violated grave. "So go home, Karl. You can't help me now."

Karl opened his mouth, but the words died in his throat. His eyes flashed past Johann's shoulder, and into them sprang a look of panic fear. With a strangled scream he spun about and went racing off, his footsteps disquietingly loud in the chill, empty silence.

JOHANN turned quickly. At first he saw nothing in the dim starlight. Then, far away, he saw a faint movement among the tombs. There was a flicker of motion in the distance where an ancient mausoleum stood all alone on the side of a little hillock. He waited, scarcely breathing, for a time, but there was no further movement at the distant tomb.

Karl's footsteps had died away, and there was not a sound to be heard. Johann fingered the pistol irresolutely. Then he thrust it back in his shirt and hurriedly made his way among the graves to where the mausoleum stood on the knoll pale and ominous in the starlight. The tomb was incredibly ancient and weathered, overgrown with a thick coating of lichen that draped it like gray spider-webs. There was an inscription above the door, but save for the single word *maranatha* it was illegible. Johann did not pause to examine it after he saw that the great stone portal was open. With cold rage surging within him he stepped over the threshold and sent the light darting about the tomb.

It was empty. Bare, granite walls met his gaze, but there was a door of rusted metal set in the further wall, and this was ajar. Johann squeezed through the gap and held the lantern high.

He was in an empty passage, paved with great stone slabs, sloping down into the side of the little hill. A faint whispering sound, like the slithering of water over jagged rocks, was audible, and Johann cautiously advanced. The passage turned and twisted in the rock, but it continued to descend steeply, and twice Johann passed the black mouths of side tunnels. Now the faint whispering was louder. He recognized the sound of voices, but there was a curious squeaking and snarling that puzzled him—a sound such as might originate in a nest of rats.

The cold tide of sanity was slowly rising in Johann's brain, and misgivings were beginning to assail him; but the thought of Elsa's looted grave enabled him to force them out of his mind. He replaced the slide on the lantern and moved forward in utter darkness, feeling his way and straining to distinguish an intelligible word from the babble of chatterings and whisperings that he heard. Slowly he advanced, sliding his hand along the wall. And suddenly a voice sounded distinct and clear above the sly mutterings.

It was harsh and grating, possessing a curious quality of depth, as though it came from far underground. And it said distinctly, ". . . has been gone long."

A wave of fear came rushing up to overwhelm Johann, and he clung desperately to the thought of Elsa and his vengeance. Fighting back his horror, he

edged forward. And as though at a signal a sudden silence fell.

Johann caught a whisper. ". . . will be back. To bring us food."

Behind him there was a rustling, swiftly growing louder! In the blackness nothing was visible, but Johann flung himself flat against the wall. The rustling swept past him, and for a moment an overpowering stench filled his nostrils. He was conscious that something had passed close to him, something he could not see for the darkness, although he felt sick and giddy with its passing. He leaned against the wall, grateful for its support, and the whisperings and shrillings broke out afresh, this time with an eery note of disappointment.

A new voice spoke, a quiet, emotionless voice with a dreadful feline purr in it. "No food could I find, my ancestors. No food or drink."

"Must we go hungry?" another voice whined, and a plaintive series of cries burst from the grim darkness that pulsed with unseen, horrific life. "You must feed us!" "It is your duty!" "We are unable."

A deeper voice spoke. "You must fulfill your trust! Each of us fed our ancestors who could not feed themselves. And it is your duty to find us food. When in time you, too, become like us, unable to go forth to search out the new graves, you will expect the next heir to fulfill his duty."

"I found food for you two nights ago," the other voice purred, and Johann caught his breath and shuddered in the shielding darkness.

"It is your trust and your privilege!" the deep voice cut in, brittle and harsh. "This is the curse and the blessing of our blood, that knows no other life after—death."

"But there are so many!" cried the other, and a stifled gasp of fear came from Johann's stiff lips. A taut silence fell, and the man turned to ice.

Past him went a soft rustling, almost brushing his numb body, swiftly dying away. Then there was no sound, only the charnel darkness that pressed silently upon him. And behind him he heard a heavy thud.

STUNG into life, Johann spun about and in an agony of fear went racing back through the twisted corridor, back to the open air and the clean starlight.

He felt a heavy blow on his chest, and staggered back, almost falling, the lantern slipping from his grasp and thudding to the ground. As he tottered there in the blackness he heard the abominable rustling go past him again and fade into silence. Gasping, uttering little moans, he fell on his hands and knees and groped frantically for the lantern.

For a moment it eluded his clutching fingers, and Johann felt the skin of his back crawling with the expectation of an attack. Then with a sob of relief he found the lantern and snatched off the slide, praying that it had not gone out.

It had not. A yellow beam of light pitilessly illuminated the thing that had halted Johann's flight—the great door in the tomb, the door by which he had entered this Cimmerian cave of night and horror. But now it was no longer ajar.

He realized what had happened. The rustling that had passed him, the heavy thud! The creature—Johann dared not give it a name—had slipped past him and closed the door to prevent his escape.

Breathing heavily, Johann put down the lantern and examined the door. There were no handles or knobs; it was a bare, rivet-studded plate of rusty metal. He braced his shoulder against it and strained until his head swam, but he could not move the door.

Again swift anger mounted within

him, and the thought of Elsa supplied the spark to the tinder-box of his fury. With rage and fear battling within him he drew out his pistol, examined it to see if the moisture of the vault had damped the charge, and slowly began to retrace his steps. He paused occasionally to flash the light behind him, but nothing lurked at his heels—nothing but the black tunnel-mouths that seemed to watch him ominously. And presently he saw that he was on the threshold of an archway that led into silent, unstirring darkness.

Twice Johann went forward, and twice he retreated in fear. At last he raised the pistol and stepped over the threshold, swiftly flashing the light about the great vault in which he stood.

For a moment he thought he was confronting an array of mummies, withered and dry. They were lying against the walls in grotesque postures, a dozen brown wrinkled bodies, some of them merely skeletons with wrinkled dark skin stretched over their bones. The floor was buried beneath a carpet of bones, ranging in color from crumbled black to shining white bones on which the marks of gnawing were dreadfully evident. At Johann's feet a skull grinned up at him in a grim mockery of mirth.

As the light gleamed through the tomb a frightful rustling and a stir went over the withered bodies. There was a monstrous shifting and squirming, and Johann saw moving what should never move, what should always lie silent and still and dead under the coffin-lid. The things crawled about like maggots blindly creeping away from the light, and Johann still stood there, the lantern in one hand and his pistol in the other, without moving a muscle or turning his eyes from the charnel horror before him. The light gleamed on cold, shiny eyes staring at him speculatively.

Behind him came the rustling, and Johann swung about, his light stabbing out through the blackness. Far down the passage a vague figure was moving toward him, slowly, implacably. Behind him came an outburst of abominable squeakings and whistlings.

Johann jerked up his pistol, the thought of Elsa steadying his hand. He would wait until the thing was almost upon him, and then . . . but his fear betrayed him. The crash of the explosion sent sharp echoes rolling through the vault.

The dreadful form did not pause. It glided onward, silently save for the faint rustling of garments, and Johann took a step back. Something clutched at his ankle, and in a frenzy of fear he kicked free. For a second he had turned his back on the half-seen figure that was inexorably drawing nearer, and when he swung about, it was almost upon him. There was no time to reload the pistol; Johann flung up his arm as though the lantern had been a weapon.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. A purring, gloating voice came from the dim form, and it said triumphantly, "We shall *not* go hungry!" And the light revealed the face of the approaching horror, and Johann dropped the lantern and began to scream, over and over, *"Elsa! Elsa!"*

A Passion in the Desert

By HONORÉ DE BALZAC

"THE whole show is dreadful," she cried, coming out of the menagerie of Monsieur Martin. She had just been looking at that daring speculator "working with his hyena," to speak in the style of the program.

"By what means," she continued, "can he have tamed these animals to such a point as to be certain of their affection for——"

"What seems to you a problem," said I, interrupting, "is really quite natural."

"Oh!" she cried, letting an incredulous smile wander over her lips.

"You think that beasts are wholly without passions?" I asked her. "Quite the reverse; we can communicate to them all the vices arising in our own state of civilization."

She looked at me with an air of astonishment.

"Nevertheless," I continued, "the first time I saw Monsieur Martin, I admit, like you, I did give vent to an exclamation of surprize. I found myself next to an old soldier with the right leg amputated, who had come in with me. His face had struck me. He had one of those intrepid heads, stamped with the seal of warfare, and on which the battles of Napoleon are written. Besides, he had that frank good-humored expression which always impresses me favorably. He was without doubt one of those troopers who are surprized at nothing, who find matter for laughter in the contortions of a dying comrade, who bury or plunder him quite light-heartedly, who stand intrepidly in the way of bullets; in fact, one of those men who waste no time in deliberation, and would not hesitate to make friends with the devil himself. After looking very attentively at the proprietor of the menagerie getting out of his box, my companion pursed up his lips with an air of mockery and contempt, with that peculiar and expressive twist which superior people assume to show they are not taken in. Then when I was expatiating on the courage of Monsieur Martin, he smiled, shook his head knowingly, and said, 'Well known.'

" 'How "well known"?' I said. 'If you would only explain to me the mystery I should be vastly obliged.

"After a few minutes, during which we made acquaintance, we went to dine at the first *restaurateur's* whose shop

caught our eye. At dessert a bottle of champagne completely refreshed and brightened up the memories of this odd old soldier. He told me his story, and I said that he had every reason to exclaim, 'Well known.' "

* * * * *

When she got home, she teased me to that extent, and made so many promises, that I consented to communicate to her the old soldier's confidences. Next day she received the following episode of an epic which one might call "The Frenchman in Egypt."

During the expedition in Upper Egypt under General Desaix, a Provençal soldier fell into the hands of the Mangrabins, and was taken by these Arabs into the deserts beyond the falls of the Nile.

In order to place a sufficient distance between themselves and the French army, the Mangrabins made forced marches, and only rested during the night. They camped round a well overshadowed by palm trees under which they had previously concealed a store of provisions. Not surmising that the notion of flight would occur to their prisoner, they contented themselves with binding his hands, and after eating a few dates, and giving provender to their horses, went to sleep.

When the brave Provençal saw that his enemies were no longer watching him, he made use of his teeth to steal a simitar, fixed the blade between his knees, and cut the cords which prevented using his hands; in a moment he was free. He at once seized a rifle and a dagger; then, taking the precaution to provide himself with a sack of dried dates, oats, and powder and shot, and to fasten a simitar to his waist, he leaped onto a horse, and spurred on vigorously in the direction where he thought to find the French army. So impatient was he to see a bivouac again that he pressed on the already tired courser at such speed that its flanks were lacerated with his spurs, and at last the poor animal died, leaving the Frenchman alone in the desert. After walking some time in the sand with all the courage of an escaped convict, the soldier was obliged to stop, as the day had already ended. In spite of the beauty of an Oriental sky at night, he felt he had not strength enough to go on. Fortunately he had been able to find a small hill, on the summit of which a few palm trees shot up into the air; it was their verdure seen from afar which had brought hope and consolation to his heart. His fatigue was so great that he lay down upon a rock of granite, capriciously cut out like a camp-bed; there he fell asleep without taking any precaution to defend himself while he slept. He had made the sacrifice of his life. His last thought was one of regret. He repented having left the Mangrabins, whose nomad life seemed to smile on him now that he was afar from them and without help.

He was awakened by the sun, whose pitiless rays fell with all their force on the granite and produced an intolerable heat—for he had had the stupidity to place himself inversely to the shadow thrown by the verdant majestic heads of the palm trees. He looked at the solitary trees and shuddered—they reminded him of the graceful shafts crowned with foliage which characterize the Saracen columns in the cathedral of Arles.

But when, after counting the palm trees, he cast his eyes around him, the most horrible despair was infused into his soul. Before him stretched an ocean without limit. The dark sand of the desert spread farther than sight could reach in every direction, and glittered like steel struck with bright light. It might have been a sea of looking-glass, or lakes melted together in a mirror. A fiery vapor carried up in streaks made a perpetual

whirlwind over the quivering land. The sky was lit with an Oriental splendor of insupportable purity, leaving naught for the imagination to desire. Heaven and earth were on fire.

The silence was awful in its wild and terrible majesty. Infinity, immensity, closed in upon the soul from every side. Not a cloud in the sky, not a breath in the air, not a flaw on the bosom of the sand, ever moving in diminutive waves; the horizon ended as at sea on a clear day, with one line of light, definite as the cut of a sword.

The Provençal threw his arms round the trunk of one of the palm trees, as though it were the body of a friend, and then in the shelter of the thin straight shadow that the palm cast upon the granite, he wept. Then sitting down he remained as he was, contemplating with profound sadness the implacable scene, which was all he had to look upon. He cried aloud, to measure the solitude. His voice, lost in the hollows of the hill, sounded faintly, and aroused no echo—the echo was in his own heart. The Provençal was only twenty-two years old. He loaded his carbine.

"There'll be time enough," he said to himself, laying on the ground the weapon which alone could bring him deliverance.

Looking by turns at the black expanse and the blue expanse, the soldier dreamed of France—he smelt with delight the gutters of Paris—he remembered the towns through which he had passed, the faces of his fellow-soldiers, the most minute details of his life. His southern fancy soon showed him the stones of his beloved Provence, in the play of the heat which waved over the spread sheet of the desert. Fearing the danger of this cruel mirage, he went down the opposite side of the hill to that by which he had come up the day before. The remains of a rug showed that this place of refuge had at one time been inhabited; at a short distance he saw some palm trees full of dates. Then the instinct which binds us to life awoke again in his heart. He hoped to live long enough to await the passing of some Arabs, or perhaps he might hear the sound of cannon; for at this time Bonaparte was traversing Egypt.

This thought gave him new life. The palm tree seemed to bend with the weight of the ripe fruit. He shook some of it down. When he tasted this unhoped-for manna, he felt sure that the palms had been cultivated by a former inhabitant—the savory, fresh meat of the dates was proof of the care of his predecessor. He passed suddenly from dark despair to an almost insane joy. He went up again to the top of the hill, and spent the rest of the day in cutting down one of the sterile palm trees, which the night before had served him for shelter. A vague memory made him think of the animals of the desert; and in case they might come to drink at the spring, visible from the base of the rocks but lost farther down, he resolved to guard himself from their visits by placing a barrier at the entrance of his hermitage.

In spite of his diligence, and the strength which the fear of being devoured asleep gave him, he was unable to cut the palm in pieces, though he succeeded in cutting it down. At eventide the king of the desert fell; the sound of its fall resounded far and wide, like a sigh in the solitude; the soldier shuddered as though he had heard some voice predicting wo.

But like an heir who does not long bewail a deceased parent, he tore off from this beautiful tree the tall broad green leaves which are its poetic adornment, and used them to mend the mat on which he was to sleep.

Fatigued by the heat and his work, he fell asleep under the red curtains of his wet cave.

In the middle of the night his sleep was troubled by an extraordinary noise. He sat up, and the deep silence around him allowed him to distinguish the accents of a respiration whose savage energy could not belong to a human creature.

A profound terror, increased still further by the darkness, the silence, and his waking images, froze his heart within him. He almost felt his hair stand on end, when by straining his eyes to their utmost he perceived through the shadows two faint yellow lights. At first he attributed these lights to the reflection of his own pupils, but soon the vivid brilliance of the night aided him gradually to distinguish the objects around him in the cave, and he beheld a huge animal lying but two steps from him. Was it a lion, a tiger, or a crocodile?

The Provençal was not educated enough to know under what species his enemy ought to be classed; but his fright was all the greater, as his ignorance led him to imagine all terrors at once; he endured a cruel torture, noting every variation of the breathing close to him without daring to make the slightest movement. An odor, pungent like that of a fox, but more penetrating, profounder—so to speak—filled the cave, and when the Provençal became sensible of this, his terror reached its height, for he could not longer doubt the proximity of a terrible companion, whose royal dwelling served him for shelter.

Presently the reflection of the moon, descending on the horizon, lit up the den, rendering gradually visible and resplendent the spotted skin of a panther.

This lion of Egypt slept, curled up like a big dog, the peaceful possessor of a sumptuous niche at the gate of an inn; its eyes opened for a moment and closed again; its face was turned toward the man. A thousand confused thoughts passed through the Frenchman's mind; first he thought of killing it with a bullet from his gun, but he saw there was not enough distance between them for him to take proper aim—the shot would miss the mark. And if it were to wake!—the thought made his limbs rigid. He listened to his own heart beating in the midst of the silence, and cursed the too violent pulsations which the flow of blood brought on, fearing to disturb that sleep which allowed him time to think of some means of escape.

Twice he placed his hand on his simitar, intending to cut off the head of his enemy; but the difficulty of cutting the stiff, short hair compelled him to abandon this daring project. To miss would be to die for certain, he thought; he preferred the chances of fair fight, and made up his mind to wait till morning. The morning did not leave him long to wait.

He could now examine the panther at ease; its muzzle was smeared with blood.

"She's had a good dinner," he thought, without troubling himself as to whether her feast might have been on human flesh. "She won't be hungry when she gets up."

It was a female. The fur on her belly and flanks was glistening white; many small marks like velvet formed beautiful bracelets round her feet; her sinuous tail was also white, ending with black rings; the overpart of her dress, yellow like unburnished gold, very lissom and soft, had the characteristic blotches in the form of rosettes, which distinguish the panther from every other feline species.

This tranquil and formidable hostess snored in an attitude as graceful as that of a cat lying on a cushion. Her blood-stained paws, nervous and well-armed, were stretched out before her face, which rested upon them, and from which radiated her straight, slender whiskers, like threads of silver.

If she had been like that in a cage,

the Provençal would have admired the grace of the animal, and the vigorous contrasts of vivid color which gave her robe an imperial splendor; but just then his sight was troubled by her sinister appearance.

The presence of the panther, even asleep, could not fail to produce the effect which the magnetic eyes of the serpent are said to have on the nightingale.

For a moment the courage of the soldier began to fail before this danger, though no doubt it would have risen at the mouth of a cannon charged with shell. Nevertheless, a bold thought brought daylight to his soul and sealed up the source of the cold sweat which sprang forth on his brow. Like men driven to bay who defy death and offer their body to the smiter, so he, seeing in this merely a tragic episode, resolved to play his part with honor to the last.

"The day before yesterday the Arabs would have killed me, perhaps," he said; so considering himself as good as dead already, he waited bravely, with excited curiosity, his enemy's awakening.

When the sun appeared, the panther suddenly opened her eyes; then she put out her paws with energy, as if to stretch them and get rid of cramp. At last she yawned, showing the formidable apparatus of her teeth and pointed tongue, rough as a file.

"A regular *petite maitresse,*" thought the Frenchman, seeing her roll herself about so softly and coquettishly. She licked off the blood which stained her paws and muzzle, and scratched her head with reiterated gestures full of prettiness. "All right, make a little toilet," the Frenchman said to himself, beginning to recover his gayety with his courage; "we'll say good morning to each other present-

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A Passion in the Desert

(Continued from preceding page)

ly," and he seized the small, short dagger which he had taken from the Mangrabins. At this moment the panther turned her head toward the man and looked at him fixedly without moving.

The rigidity of her metallic eyes and their insupportable luster made him shudder, especially when the animal walked toward him. But he looked at her caressingly, staring into her eyes in order to magnetize her, and let her come quite close to him; then with a movement both gentle and amorous, as though he were caressing the most beautiful of women, he passed his hand over her whole body, from the head to the tail, scratching the flexible vertebræ which divided the panther's yellow back. The animal waved her tail voluptuously, and her eyes grew gentle; and when for the third time the Frenchman accomplished this interesting flattery, she gave forth one of those purrings by which our cats express their pleasure; but this murmur issued from a throat so powerful and so deep, that it resounded through the cave like the last vibrations of an organ in a church. The man, understanding the importance of his caresses, redoubled them in such a way as to surprize and stupefy his imperious courtezan. When he felt sure of having extinguished the ferocity of his capricious companion, whose hunger had so fortunately been satisfied the day before, he got up to go out of the cave; the panther let him go out, but when he had reached the summit of the hill she sprang with the lightness of a sparrow hopping from twig to twig, and rubbed herself against his legs, putting up her back after the manner of all the race of cats. Then regarding her guest with eyes whose glare had softened a little, she gave vent to that wild cry which naturalists compare to the grating of a saw.

"She is exacting," said the Frenchman, smiling.

He was bold enough to play with her ears; he caressed her belly and scratched her head as hard as he could.

When he saw that he was successful, he tickled her skull with the point of his dagger, watching for the right moment to kill her, but the hardness of her bones made him tremble for his success.

The sultana of the desert showed herself gracious to her slave; she lifted her head, stretched out her neck, and manifested her delight by the tranquillity of her attitude. It suddenly occurred to the soldier that to kill this savage princess with one blow he must stab her in the throat.

He raised the blade, when the panther, satisfied no doubt, laid herself gracefully at his feet, and cast up at him glances in which, in spite of their natural fierceness, was mingled confusedly a kind of goodwill. The poor Provençal ate his dates, leaning against one of the palm trees, and casting his eyes alternately on the desert in quest of some liberator and on his terrible companion to watch her uncertain clemency.

The panther looked at the place where the date stones fell, and every time that he threw one down her eyes expressed an incredible mistrust.

She examined the man with an almost commercial prudence. However, this examination was favorable to him, for when he had finished his meager meal she licked his boots with her powerful rough tongue, brushing off with marvelous skill the dust gathered in the creases.

"Ah, but when she's really hungry!"

thought the Frenchman. In spite of the shudder this thought caused him, the soldier began to measure curiously the proportions of the panther, certainly one of the most splendid specimens of its race. She was three feet high and four feet long without counting her tail; this powerful weapon, rounded like a cudgel, was nearly three feet long. The head, large as that of a lioness, was distinguished by a rare expression of refinement. The cold cruelty of a tiger was dominant, it was true, but there was also a vague resemblance to the face of a sensual woman. Indeed, the face of this solitary queen had something of the gayety of a drunken Nero: she had satiated herself with blood, and she wanted to play.

The soldier tried if he might walk up and down, and the panther left him free, contenting herself with following him with her eyes, less like a faithful dog than a big Angora cat, observing every movement of her master.

When he looked round, he saw, by the spring, the remains of his horse; the panther had dragged the carcass all that way; about two-thirds of it had been devoured already. The sight reassured him.

It was easy to explain the panther's absence, and the respect she had had for him while he slept. The first piece of good luck emboldened him to tempt the future, and he conceived the wild hope of continuing on good terms with the panther during the entire day, neglecting no means of taming her and remaining in her good graces.

He returned to her, and had the unspeakable joy of seeing her wag her tail with an almost imperceptible movement at his approach. He sat down then, without fear, by her side, and they began to

(Please turn to page 628)

BACK COPIES

Because of the many requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES, the publishers do their best to keep a sufficient supply on hand to meet all demands. This magazine was established early in 1923 and there has been a steady drain on the supply of back copies ever since. At present, we have the following back numbers on hand for sale:

1932	1933	1934	1935	1936
Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.	Jan.
Feb.	. . .	Feb.	Feb.	Feb.
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.	May	May	May	May
June	. .	June	June	June
.....	July	July	July	July
Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	Aug.	....
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Oct.	. .	Oct.	Oct.	Oct.
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Dec.	....	Dec.	Dec.	....

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WEIRD TALES

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A Passion in the Desert

(Continued from preceding page)

play together; he took her paws and muzzle, pulled her ears, rolled her over on her back, stroked her warm, delicate flanks. She let him do whatever he liked, and when he began to stroke the hair on her feet she drew her claws in carefully.

The man, keeping the dagger in one hand, thought to plunge it into the belly of the too-confiding panther, but he was afraid that he would be immediately strangled in her last convulsive struggle; besides, he felt in his heart a sort of remorse which bid him respect a creature that had done him no harm. He seemed to have found a friend, in a boundless desert; half unconsciously he thought of his first sweetheart, whom he had nicknamed "Mignonne" by way of contrast, because she was so atrociously jealous that all the time of their love he was in fear of the knife with which she had always threatened him.

This memory of his early days suggested to him the idea of making the young panther answer to this name, now that he began to admire with less terror her swiftness, suppleness, and softness. Toward the end of the day he had familiarized himself with his perilous position; he now almost liked the painfulness of it. At last his companion had got into the habit of looking up at him whenever he cried in a falsetto voice, "Mignonne."

At the setting of the sun Mignonne gave, several times running, a profound melancholy cry. "She's been well brought up," said the light-hearted soldier; "she says her prayers." But this mental joke only occurred to him when he noticed what a pacific attitude his companion remained in. "Come, *ma petite blonde,* I'll let you go to bed first," he said to her, counting on the activity of his own legs to run away as quickly as possible, directly she was asleep, and seek another shelter for the night.

The soldier waited with impatience the hour of his flight, and when it had arrived he walked vigorously in the direction of the Nile; but hardly had he made a quarter of a league in the sand when he heard the panther bounding after him, crying with that saw-like cry more dreadful even than the sound of her leaping.

"Ah!" he said, "then she's taken a fancy to me; she has never met anyone before, and it is really quite flattering to have her first love." That instant the man fell into one of those movable quicksands so terrible to travelers and from which it is impossible to save oneself. Feeling himself caught, he gave a shriek of alarm; the panther seized him with her teeth by the collar, and, springing vigorously backward, drew him as if by magic out of the whirling sand.

"Ah, Mignonne!" cried the soldier, caressing her enthusiastically; "we're bound together for life and death—but no jokes, mind!" and he retraced his steps.

From that time the desert seemed inhabited. It contained a being to whom the man could talk, and whose ferocity was rendered gentle by him, though he could not explain to himself the reason for their strange friendship. Great as was the soldier's desire to stay upon guard, he slept.

On awakening he could not find Mignonne; he mounted the hill, and in the distance saw her springing toward him after the habit of these animals, who can not run on account of the extreme flexibility of the vertebral column. Mignonne

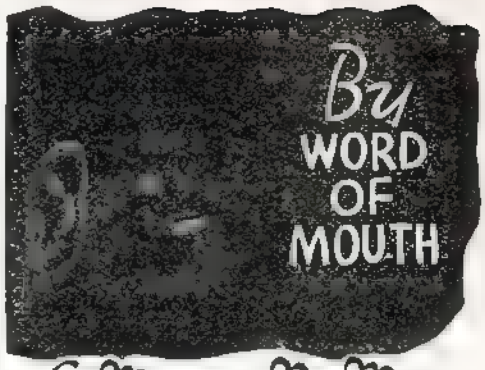
arrived, her jaws covered with blood; she received the wonted caress of her companion, showing with much purring how happy it made her. Her eyes, full of languor, turned still more gently than the day before toward the Provençal, who talked to her as one would to a tame animal.

"Ah! *Mademoiselle*, you are a nice girl, aren't you? Just look at that! So we like to be made much of, don't we? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? So you have been eating some Arab or other, have you? That doesn't matter. They're animals just the same as you are; but don't you take to eating Frenchmen, or I shan't like you any longer."

She played like a dog with its master, letting herself be rolled over, knocked about, and stroked, alternately; sometimes she herself would provoke the soldier, putting up her paw with a soliciting gesture.

Some days passed in this manner. This companionship permitted the Provençal to appreciate the sublime beauty of the desert; now that he had a living thing to think about, alternations of fear and quiet, and plenty to eat, his mind became filled with contrast and his life began to be diversified.

Solitude revealed to him all her secrets, and enveloped him in her delights. He discovered in the rising and setting of the sun sights unknown to the world. He knew what it was to tremble when he heard over his head the hiss of a bird's wing, so rarely did they pass, or when he saw the clouds, changing and many-colored travelers, melt one into another. He studied in the night-time the effect of the moon upon the ocean of sand, where the simoon made waves swift of movement and rapid in their change. He lived the life of the Eastern day, marveling at its wonderful pomp; then, after having reveled in the sight of a hurricane over the



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plain where the whirling sands made red, dry mists and death-bearing clouds, he would welcome the night with joy, for then fell the healthful freshness of the stars, and he listened to imaginary music in the skies.

At last he grew passionately fond of the panther; for some sort of affection was a necessity.

Whether it was that his will, powerfully projected, had modified the character of his companion, or whether, because she found abundant food in her predatory excursions in the deserts, she respected the man's life, he began to fear for it no longer, seeing her so well tamed.

He devoted the greater part of his time to sleep, but he was obliged to watch like a spider in its web that the moment of his deliverance might not escape him, if anyone should pass the line marked by the horizon. He had sacrificed his shirt to make a flag with, which he hung at the top of a palm tree, whose foliage he had torn off. Taught by necessity, he found the means of keeping it spread out, by fastening it with little sticks; for the wind might not be blowing at the moment when the passing traveler was looking through the desert.

It was during the long hours, when he had abandoned hope, that he amused himself with the panther. He had come to learn the different inflections of her voice, the expressions of her eyes; he had studied the capricious patterns of all the rosettes which marked the gold of her robe. Mignonne was not even angry when he took hold of the tuft at the end of her tail to count the rings, those graceful ornaments which glittered in the sun like jewelry. It gave him pleasure to contemplate the supple, fine outlines of her form, the whiteness of her belly, the graceful pose of her head. But it was especially when she was playing that he felt most pleasure in looking at her; the agility and youthful lightness of her movements were a continual surprize to him; he wondered at the supple way in which she jumped and climbed, washed herself and arranged her fur, crouched down and prepared to spring. However rapid her spring might be, however slippery the stone she was on, she would always stop short at the word "Mignonne."

One day, in a bright midday sun, an enormous bird coursed through the air. The man left his panther to look at this new guest; but after waiting a moment the deserted sultana growled deeply.

"My goodness! I do believe she's jealous," he cried, seeing her eyes become hard again; "the soul of Virginie has passed into her body; that's certain."

The eagle disappeared into the air, while the soldier admired the curved contour of the panther.

But there was such youth and grace in her form! she was beautiful as a woman! the blond fur of her robe mingled well with the delicate tints of faint white which marked her flanks.

The profuse light cast down by the sun made this living gold, these russet markings, to burn in a way to give them an indefinable attraction.

The man and the panther looked at each other with a look full of meaning; the coquette quivered when she felt her friend stroke her head; her eyes flashed like lightning — then she shut them tightly.

"She has a soul," he said, looking at the stillness of this queen of the sands, golden like them, white like them, solitary and burning like them.

* * * * * * *

"WELL," she said, "I have read your plea in favor of beasts; but how

did two so well adapted to understand each other end?"

"Ah, well! you see, they ended as all great passions do end—by a misunderstanding. For some reason *one* suspects the other of treason; they don't come to an explanation through pride, and quarrel and part from sheer obstinacy."

"Yet sometimes at the best moments a single word or a look is enough—but anyhow go on with your story."

"It's horribly difficult, but you will understand, after what the old villain told me over his champagne.

"He said, 'I don't know if I hurt her, but she turned round, as if enraged, and with her sharp teeth caught hold of my leg—gently, I daresay; but I, thinking she would devour me, plunged my dagger into her throat. She rolled over, giving a cry that froze my heart; and I saw her dying, still looking at me without anger. I would have given all the world to have brought her to life again. It was as though I had murdered a real person; and the soldiers who had seen my flag, and were come to my assistance, found me in tears.

" 'Well, sir,' he said, after a moment of silence, 'since then I have been in war in Germany, in Spain, in Russia, in France; I've certainly carried my carcass about a good deal, but never have I seen anything like the desert. Ah! yes, it is very beautiful!'

" 'What did you feel there?' I asked.

" 'Oh! that can't be described, young man. Besides, I am not always regretting my palm trees and my panther. I should have to be very melancholy for that. In the desert, you see, there is everything, and nothing.'

" 'Yes, but explain——'

" 'Well,' he said, with an impatient gesture, 'it is God without mankind.' "

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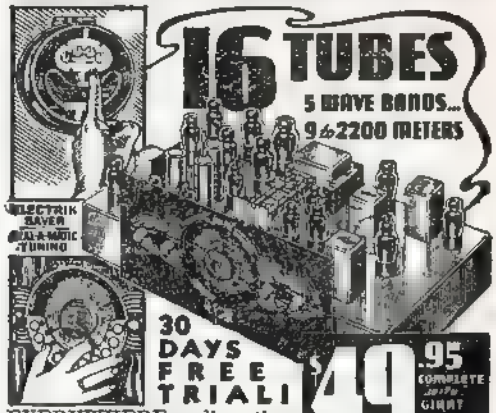

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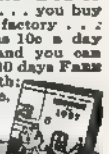

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THE controversy over our cover designs has burst wide open again, following our using a cover painted by J. Allen St. John after more than three years of covers by Margaret Brundage. All in all, your reactions to the cover have been quite favorable, and it seems to be the consensus that we should use both Mr. St. John's and Mrs. Brundage's work. Mr. St. John is known throughout the world for his illustrations of the Tarzan stories. The cover illustration for *The Fire of Asshurbanipal* in this issue is also his work. We have received many letters asking that we also use Virgil Finlay for one or more covers. We are happy to announce that Mr. Finlay will do the cover design for a new Seabury Quinn story, which will be published soon. If it is as good as his black and white work, then it should be something to talk about.

Whooey! What a Cover!

Jack Johnson, of Philadelphia, writes: "Whooey! What a cover! At first look I was wondering how Brundage ever drew such a weird cover; however, upon closer examination, I perceived that the drawing was not the delicate and fine work of Brundage. And sure enough, the cover was drawn by J. Allen St. John. Since the cover was so weird, I thought I was in for a good tale; instead, I was highly disappointed, for the style of the author makes the story seem just another adventure yarn. Nevertheless, there were some good scenes in the story; still, it didn't take first place. The best story in the issue is Robert E. Howard's mighty yarn, *Red Nails*. I, for one, am very sorry that of Conan there will be no more. I hope that Howard's story in the November issue will be as good as his Conan stories. Robert Bloch's stories seem to improve with each one. His latest, *The Opener of the Way*, is one thrilling story. Just a word about Finlay; he undoubtedly is the best artist you ever had. His illustrations give the stories much more appeal. The issue, all around, is very good."

A Good Issue

H. P. writes from Dallas: "I have enjoyed *Red Nails* very much. Didn't like your covers, but your October cover is really good. The blue sky is particularly effective coupled with the crimson cloaks. If you continue such wonderful covers I'll always read WT. It surely stood out on the news stands this month. On previous covers the forms of the maidens always were distressingly slim. The young woman's form on the October issue was perfect (and still is). The stories all satisfy me, and since I am no letter-writer I shall conclude this epistle."

Brundage and St. John

Robert W. Lowndes, of Canaan, Connecticut, writes: "The St. John cover on the latest edition of WT is of more than passing interest inasmuch as this cover is more objectively weird than any other you have had since the one illustrating *The People of the Black Circle* for September, 1934. This, despite the fact that said cover, though well-chosen as to the scene represented, is a trifle crudely drawn and not up to the artist's other front-pieces on WT. And therein lies one reader's complaint; your covers (up to now) have all been too much of a sameness. While I do not in any way disparage Mrs. Brundage's delicate artistry and impeccable good taste, nor decry her little grotesqueries which other readers seem to think a lack of anatomical observation while they insist these covers are not weird, I do deplore the lack of variety thus entailed. Look, I implore you, at C. C. Senf's cover for January, 1932, illustrating *The Monster of*

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912,

Of Weird Tales, published monthly at Indianapolis, Indiana, for October 1, 1936.

State of Illinois }
County of Cook } ss.

Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Wm. R. Sprenger, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Weird Tales and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher—Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Editor—Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Managing Editor—None.

Business Manager—William R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member must be given.)

Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Ind.

Wm. R. Sprenger, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Farnsworth Wright, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill

George M. Cornelius, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Indiana.

George H. Cornelius, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Indiana.

P. W. Cornelius, 2457 E. Washington St., Indianapolis, Indiana.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state). None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is_____. (This information is required from daily publications only.)

WM. R. SPRENGER,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26th day of September, 1936. M. C. TRAVERS,
[SEAL] Notary Public.

My commission expires February 8, 1937.

the Prophecy. There is weirdness for you; it is weird, grotesque, unearthly, and beautiful. Mrs. Brundage's weirdness is subtle, delightful in its undertone and innuendo; at times she approaches true objective strangeness, but it is unfair to her, your steady readers, and your potential adherents to give us the same style of cover month after month—there have been no less than 39 consecutive covers by the same artist. None of these (save that gruesome error on the May, 1935, issue) have been bad; some have been true masterpieces of their type. But when one spreads an array of WEIRD TALES over a table and stands back at a distance to get the effect, the eternal sameness is quite evident; there is not so much to catch the eye as there would be were several artists represented and their several styles offset each other. The same case can be drawn for the potential reader who sees the magazine innumerable times on the stands before investigating. But this is not a tirade on how to obtain readers, nor would it help my point to allow it to become that. My plea is for more of the bizarre and the unusual both in and about WEIRD TALES; for progress in appearance as well as contents. Trifles, readers will say, trifles small; yes, but trifles great indeed. Who will deny the grand improvement over the illustrations of, say, October, 1933, the present issue shows? The double-page table of contents as of 1932, the double-page layout for all illustrated stories as of June, 1936, the neat, artistic, blocked-off cover of May, 1936, all these are but trifles, but they make for that perfection which is no trifle. Now that Conan's career is over (nothing that I could say here could possibly express my regret at the loss of the unreplaceable Robert E. Howard and his barbarian, Solomon Kane, and gems like *The Black Stone*, *Worms of the Earth*, and *The Gods of Bal-Sagoth*), I have found it of some interest to note the various depictions of Conan. J. M. Wilcox renders a credible portrait, H. S. De Lay's conception is interesting, and Mrs. Brundage's three pictures are well done, though only the first, I think (May, 1934) is much of a likeness. But the prize drawing of Conan (for me) is the one drawn by Hugh Rankin for *Rogues in the House* (January, 1934). Here we see the tousled mane, the strong, handsome, but strange and ferine countenance that his many lemans found so captivating. And here is the sparseness of

the panther, yet the implication of titanic strength, and withal a certain grace that is quite lacking in all other depictions of the Cimmerian. This could well be at an earlier part of his career, while Napoli's rugged king shows him considerably later. One more request or two and I shall leave you in peace for the moment. Could we not have Mrs. Brundage's portrayal of Jules de Grandin soon? It has been at least five years since he has been on a cover; I have never seen him portrayed and I haven't missed an issue since the one dated October, 1931. After reading one character's description of him, *quote:* 'If there were such a thing as a platinum-blond tomcat, I'm sure it would look like Doctor de Grandin.' *(Hands of the Dead,* January, 1935) *unquote,* I have been watching each issue wherein a de Grandin tale was promised, for a picture of the mercurial little Frenchman to appear. But, alas, no dice; is luck entirely against all of the readers who, like myself, yearn for a picture of *notre brave collègue,* Jules? I may as well ask for Northwest Smith on the cover, too, while the petition is up. Oh, well, Mr. Editor, don't let it get you; just think of the thousands of readers (avid as myself) who do *not* plague you with little requests for odds and ends and things."

From the Orient

Charles F. Choate writes from Peiping, China: "This is the first time I have written you, although I have been reading the magazine for about six months. The only thing I can see wrong is the cover. It is all right with me, but I know lots of people who tear it off as soon as they get the mag. It is all right to have the girl partially dressed but not like it is in this issue (July). The girls are plenty good, though. The best stories in the July issue were *Loot of the Vampire, Lost Paradise,* and the reprint, *The Ring of Thoth.*"

A Real Surprize Ending

James N. Mooney, of Palms, California, writes: "The October issue is the best this year. Glad to see St. John back. The cover is beautifully done and it *is* weird. I would suggest that you use him for the covers that you wish to be creepy and weird, and keep Brundage for the beautiful and fantastic girls, occasionally using a design by Senf and others. Finlay's drawing for *The Tree of Life* is striking. He has worked a beautiful design into it. De Lay is another fine addition to your staff. The stories are excellent. *Doom of the House of Duryea* was a very powerful story, the surprize ending really coming as a surprize. I usually suspect them before I read them, but this one was an exception. Henry Kuttner's short had a very tricky ending too."

Weirder Cover

John V. Baltadonis, of Philadelphia, writes: "While the cover by J. Allen St. John was not as well drawn as the covers by Mrs. Brundage, it was much weirder than any by her. The best story in the issue is Dorothy Quick's quaint yarn, *The Lost Door.* This story is written in such an appealing manner. Closely following come Robert Bloch's and C. L. Moore's tales, *The Opener of the Way* and *The Tree of Life,* respectively. I was glad to see the return of Northwest Smith. Virgil Finlay's illustrations in the issue are superb. I am indeed pleased to note the return, in the next issue, of Jules de Grandin and his helpful aid, Doctor Trowbridge. The reprint, *The Great Keinplatz Experiment,* is very amusing. Tch, tch, what a predicament!"

St. John's Cover

Donald Allgeier, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "The cover of the October WT is weird-looking all right, but it is a distinct let-down after the beautiful work of Brundage. I don't care for it. Nor do I like the illustration for *Isle of the Undead,* though I do not know who drew it. Virgil Finlay is fine as always, and De Lay is good. I like the latter's conception of Conan. And, speaking of Conan, *Red Nails* gets first place in October. *The Tree of Life* and *The Lost Door* are in a tie for second, and *Doom of the House of Duryea* is third. *Isle of the Undead* and *The Opener of the Way* fell just a little short of excellence through slight imperfections. *The Secret of Kralitz* was very good, though somewhat reminiscent of Bloch's *Feast in the Abbey.* I enjoyed the reprint from Doyle, finding it quite amusing and entertaining. The next issue promises to be an exceptional one. Everyone should be delighted at the return of de Grandin. Your authors have expressed the sorrow we all feel at Howard's death better than I could. I'm glad that I have all the Conan stories

(and many of his others). I shall reread them often. In my opinion the three best yarns about Conan were *The Scarlet Citadel*, *A Witch Shall be Born*, and *The Hour of the Dragon*. Weird fiction has lost its greatest writer of historical weird tales. We still aren't having any contests, so I have a suggestion to make. Let's have the readers vote on the five best WT authors—conduct a poll of them all. Then print pictures and biographical sketches about the five chosen. I'd select Moore, Howard, Quinn, Hamilton, and Jacobi, in that order. You might also take a vote on the ten best stories of all time and reprint the ten selected. I like the September cover, but I'd rather like to see the words 'The Unique Magazine' on every cover again. And what was the need of changing the dates again? You said there was no need of dating a magazine ahead and then you retract and conform to others' practise. I see no need of this second change."

Cheap Horror-Thriller

Donn Brazier, of Milwaukee, writes: "How could you print that disgusting, steeped-in-the-pulp, horror-thriller, *Isle of the Undead?* I am just a new reader, having purchased my fifth copy; and I may become a *former* reader if any more such trash as that is printed. I had thought that WEIRD TALES had risen above the cheap, pulp horror-thrillers, but after reading *Isle of the Undead* I wonder. . . . Keep WEIRD TALES weird—not horrible."

Knock! Knock!

A reader from New York, who asks that we do not use her name, writes: "Since you ask for opinions on the stories, I will give mine, principally because I am so disappointed with *Isle of the Undead* in the October issue. It does not belong in your magazine. . . . It is frankly sadistic and pornographic with its emphasis of nakedness, etc. You don't need that any more than you need the Brundage naked covers. If they had followed the story I would not have objected to them so much, but they never came within a mile of the story. If the story spoke of a girl with long golden hair, Brundage put short black hair on her—she never got it right. I do not care for *The Doors of Death* either—it didn't get anywhere. It was badly constructed. If you wanted a thriller of terror,

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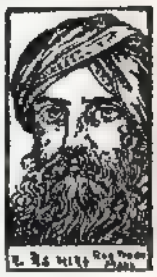

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you could have had the servant drop dead as he went to answer the bell, and with no one else knowing the secret—that *would* have been a facer. But it didn't get anywhere. *The Opener of the Way* is good, a really weird tale, for it leaves you with the idea that the soul of the father stayed in the statue. *The Lost Door* is good. *Doom of the House of Duryea* is good, and *The Secret of Kralitz* will pass. *The Tree of Life* of course is the 'tops,' as are all of Moore's stories. Moore is a marvelous find. *Red Nails* is about the only Conan story I have not been enthusiastic about—somehow it didn't 'click' with me. But I can't say how sorry I am about Howard. The poem by R. H. Barlow is splendid. I feel, too, as though Conan has been thrust back into Limbo, and that isn't right, with his vitality and courage and aliveness. I wish someone could pick up the torch Howard has let drop. Well, this is enough, I guess. As to WEIRD TALES, I simply feel I can't get along without it."

The Facts of Astronomy

Arthur R. Mink, of Boise, Idaho, writes: "I am one of the recent converts to WEIRD TALES, having started reading your magazine for the science-fiction it contains—I am a science-fiction fan of good standing. I consider myself very fortunate in having a friend who is an old-time WEIRD fan. I have borrowed his collection, which I am now diligently reading. I think that your science-fiction stories are the best part of your magazine. I especially enjoyed *The Man Who Was Two Men.* Which brings me down to the subject of this letter. In a recent issue (May) a letter by Mr. E. L. Mengshoel was printed. Among other things, Mr. Mengshoel had the effrontery to state that interplanetary stories might be interesting to those who knew none of the facts of astronomy. What I want to know is, 'Where did he garner this jewel of misinformation?' I do know that his statement was an exact contradiction of facts as I have observed them. In my own case, for instance, I have been an ardent amateur astronomer for several years, and the more I learn of the 'facts of astronomy,' the more I realize the plausibility of interplanetary stories. While I don't claim to be a second Jeans, I will match my knowledge of astronomy, especially in the field of nebulæ, against his any day in the week. Unless the people who make statements like his are prepared to back them up with the knowledge in question they should steer clear of the subject. In case Mr. Mengshoel, or anyone else, wishes to enter into verbal combat with me on the subject, I am at his disposal and he may 'choose his weapons.' There has been considerable bandying about of the sentence, 'No one over the mental age of twelve years reads science-fiction.' I would not presume to assert that I'm mentally older than twelve, although physically I am. Just let any unbiased person tell me—using the above sentence as a basis for comparison—the mental age of people who believe in vampires and werewolves, which science does not recognize as possible, but deride the possibility of interplanetary flight, which is considered as inevitable by most scientists. Let the anti-science-fictionists ponder on that before they again cast aspersions at that which they don't understand. So, in view of the above, I put in a request for more science-fiction. No, I am not asking you to drop your vampires or your werewolves; just give us a little science-fiction in each issue to take the nasty taste out of our mouths. I am greatly in favor of a department devoted to the investigation of weird knowledge; not legerdemain, but the old books and religions, such as that of the Druid-Worshippers. And I'll bet that almost every reader wants to know: Is there such a thing as the *Necronomicon?* If so, what and where? Why not give the readers a break? I am an ardent C. L. Moore fan. Moore's stories are always beautiful in writing-style if not in subject matter. More by C. L. Moore." [The *Necronomicon,* that book by the mad Arab Abdul Alhazred, so often referred to by WT writers, is part of the Lovecraft mythology, being a fictional invention of H. P. Lovecraft's fertile brain. —THE EDITOR.]

An Admirer of Howard

T. Gelbert, of Niagara Falls, New York, writes: "It is with deep regret that I learn of the death of Robert E. Howard. Being an avid reader of WEIRD TALES for some four years, no story has interested me more than a Conan the barbarian story. To my knowledge Howard was the one and only author who dared to introduce a bit of sex into his stories. In my mind he will live till I die as an incomparable author of the kind of weird tales a red-blooded man likes.

May the good Lord reward him for the many happy hours he has given to so many WEIRD TALES readers."

Oogy-Woogy Tales

Gertrude Hemken, of Chicago, writes: "*The Door Into Infinity* was rather a chiller, one of those oogy-woogy tales that keeps one wondering what the deuce is going on behind that door which can be opened only by incantations, and what manner of strange entity moves in that world beyond our ken. Guess I didn't like those woims, and I'm glad the hero saved his li'l wifie, and nassy nassy Chandra Dass was a goner. Goody, goody! Yessir, it was exciting, ever' bit of it. Doctor Satan is still very exciting and quite strange. The man is more or less of a mental genius. Somehow, though, I don't seem quite satisfied with the stories. They end too abruptly. (Or am I expecting too much?) *Werewolf of the Sahara*—ah, that was a tale! First it portrays my ideal of a tall blond man, and then strong minds and will-powers, and werewolves and the mysterious wastes of the Sahara. Fascinating and frightening episodes of a land that remains unknown, for all the probings of scientists and explorers. *The Medici Boots* is another appeaser to my insatiable appetite for tales of ancient—or rather medieval—Europe. Lovely ladies, witches and what not, all bound together to bring this evil to the present day and a woman's vanity to learn if her footsies were smaller than those of the poor gal of centuries agone. No kiddin', it was ver', ver' good."

Ten Best Stories

N. W. Siringer, of Lakewood, Ohio, writes: "Congratulations on printing such fine stories as *The Room of Shadows, Strange Interval* and *The Door Into Infinity.* Keep the issues well scattered with Clark Ashton Smith's and H. P. Lovecraft's little gems. The ten best stories in the last three years have been: *The Solitary Hunters,* by Keller; *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof,* by Eadie; *The Seven Geases,* by C. A. Smith; *A Witch Shall Be Born,* by Howard; *Once in a Thousand Years,* by Middleton; *Doctor Satan,* by Paul Ernst; *The Six Sleepers,* by Hamilton; *The Hour of the Dragon,* by Howard; *The Graveyard Rats,* by Kuttner; *The Room of Shadows,* by Arthur J. Burks. The death of Robert E. Howard, the leading

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writer of WEIRD TALES, leaves a gap that will be hard to fill. His stories have been filled with action and suspense, and his greatest asset was that they were written in excellent style; his characters have lived and loved throughout them, and have made the reader live and love with them."

Cover Comments

A. L. Jordan, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, writes: "I still do not like to see so much space given to readers' letters. The best magazines do not follow this practise. It is not necessary for you to spread titles and authors' names all over the cover. If they must be on the outside, they can be placed at the bottom. With some magazines, I will pass up an issue because I do not see a favorite name on the cover, but I find that WEIRD TALES has always had so many good stories in it that I buy it anyhow. I buy the magazine because it has a beautiful nude on the cover. However, I should like to see some expression other than horror on the face. In the stories there is often a character of an irresistible siren who lures men to doom. I should like to see one of these women if the artist can combine the sweet and evil in one face. There is, likewise, the fighting woman like Jirel of Joiry, who must be beautiful enough to represent on the cover."

A Truly Creepy Story

Sylvia Eyler, of Frederick, Maryland, writes: "I have been a silent reader of WT for some time again. . . . I'd like to say a few things about the stories. *Black Canaan* in June was truly creepy, and by far the best of that issue. I like scientific yarns like *The Brain in the Jar,* also, as there is a trace of possibility of there being facts as a foundation on which the story was built. Some of the stories I did not care for—such as *Mordecai's Pipe, Lethe, Harbor of Ghosts,* etc. . . . In the September number *Werewolf of the Sahara* was easily one of the finest chillers you could find, with *The Door Into Infinity* a good second. The reprint, *Four Wooden Stakes,* is good, for I've read of vampires, and old people believed in them along with 'spooks,' 'ha'nts,' 'spells' and the like! I like a lot of the oriental, for there are more queer things about orientals than about a plain American!"

An Author Comments

Clark Ashton Smith writes from his home in Auburn, California: "I enjoyed the current issue of WT, which seems to strike a pretty high level. *Red Nails, The Opener of the Way, The Tree of Life, Doom of the House of Duryea,* and *The Secret of Kralitz,* are all noteworthy yarns. I admired Barlow's fine sonnet in memory of R. E. H. It seems hard to realize that Howard's work is at an end, and that a whole world of noble myth and fantasy has perished in his dying. What he has left behind, however, may well outlast many things that have been acclaimed and widely touted as literature."

A Tiptop Issue

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "You deserve plenty of commendation for the October issue of WEIRD TALES. A fine job, no mistake about that. *Red Nails* was excellent and I finished the yarn with regret. That being the final one about Conan, we cannot help but realize that two doughty warriors passed on together, Mr. Howard and Conan—two whom we are bound to miss more and more as the months go by. *The Tree of Life,* by Moore, was fine. Moore never disappoints, having that rare gift of imagination inexhaustible which keeps this author's yarns different. *The Lost Door* was the most original ghost story that I have seen in many a moon. The women are certainly making a place for themselves as weird-fictionists. *Doom of the House of Duryea* was the first really good vampire tale in a long time. It was written convincingly and contained a new and original 'twist,' not the same old stereotyped plot. *The Secret of Kralitz, The Opener of the Way, The Doors of Death* and that humorous little yarn of Conan Doyle's were all good. But *Isle of the Undead* didn't seem to click. That one was full of 'stock characters,' unconvincing and uninteresting. It seems to me that Henry Kuttner's work has been very good to date. He writes in the Lovecraftian manner and does a pretty fair job of it, too. And, speaking of Lovecraft, many thanks for scheduling two new stories by him. Now that he has returned to the WT fold let's keep him there. The verse selections were tiptop, especially Mr. Barlow's tribute to Mr. Howard, and the cover by St. John the best in years. . . . How about another of those space-horror yarns, which used to be so popular? Something like *The Space-Eaters?* You haven't given us one in

years. Get Frank Belknap Long, Jr., back on the job. He knows how to do that kind and we haven't heard from him for eons. If you don't give us one soon, I shall be tempted to do one, myself, and send it in. . . . I was disappointed at not finding a new serial story listed for next month. Are you discontinuing them? Remember, Mr. Editor, serials are the backbone of any magazine, and 'to be continued in our next' is a strong incentive to keep buying."

The House of Duryea

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "The October WT is one of the best issues this year. Picking first place in this number is like looking for a needle in a haystack. However, before commenting on the stories, I must express my enthusiasm for the truly weird cover. St. John gave us an illustration that is really representative of the type of stories that are in WT. For first place I pick *Doom of the House of Duryea,* by Earl Peirce, Jr. It is an unusual and gripping vampire tale with modern men in a modern setting. Because this story is convincingly weird and up-to-date, I award the top spot to it. I'd like to see more of Mr. Peirce's work in WT. In second place and close on the heels of the Duryea tale—so close that first place is almost occupied by Siamese twins—stands *The Lost Door,* by Dorothy Quick. I enjoyed this story as much as any I've read this year. I am still wondering what explanation Jim would give for the disappearance of Wrexler. The people of Rougemont and Wrexler's friends in America would probably want to know too. However, that does not detract from the excellence of Miss Quick's yarn. Third place is grabbed by *The Opener of the Way,* the latest masterpiece by Robert Bloch. The weird atmosphere is built up very nicely and sustained at the conclusion. Although *Isle of the Undead,* by Eshbach, copped the cover, I cared less for this story than any in the issue. Just another formula fantasy without enough surprizes. You'd better stay away from this kind. . . . *The Secret of Kralitz,* by Kuttner, is an excellent fantasy, and I rate it among the best short shorts in WT this year. *The Doors of Death* and the reprint, *The Great Keinplatz Experiment,* are both very good stories and I enjoyed them tremendously."

NEXT MONTH

The Thing on the Door-Step

By H. P. LOVECRAFT

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Concise Comments

Miss Elvina Smith, of Bloomfield, New Jersey, writes: "It has been only since June that I have been reading WEIRD TALES. I like these stories because there's adventure and also because it's something different. So far I've liked most of them, especially *Loot of the Vampire. Werewolf of the Sahara* and *Red Nails.* I wasn't so interested in *When the World Slept* or *Isle of the Undead* because it was a love-ending affair. I'd like more of an exciting ending. So please make some of your weird tales end up weird."

John Elsey, of Detroit, writes: "The cover on the October issue is swell. I like it because it is weird. After all, WT should have a weird cover as it is a weird story magazine."

F. F. Kershall, of Coronado, California, writes: "I do not think *The Door Into Infinity* worthy of Edmond Hamilton. Can't understand how the editor let it get in the magazine."

Alvin V. Pershing writes from Anderson, Indiana: "I desire to state to you, that as far as I am concerned, one of the very finest and supremely outstanding stories which has been printed in the last several issues was *The Faceless God,* by Bloch. It seems to me that Bloch did not receive the credit due him for this truly 'weird' tale."

Robert A. Madle, of Philadelphia, writes: "In the current (October) issue, Dorothy Quick's eery horror yarn receives first place in my estimation. Following *The Lost Door* comes the last part of the last Conan adventure, *Red Nails,* by the inimitable Robert E. Howard. Howard's death is certainly a blow to weird fiction. I'll miss his stories of that super he-man, Conan."

George N. Heflick, of Hiram, Ohio, writes: "Please accept my heartiest congratulations on the illustration by J. Allen St. John on the cover of the October issue of WEIRD TALES—the first really *weird* cover you have offered in many, many months. May there be more of the same!"

Your Favorite Stories

Readers, what stories do you like best in our October issue? Write a letter or fill out the coupon at the bottom of this page and send it in to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES. The last part of *Red Nails,* by the late Robert E. Howard, was your favorite story in the October issue, as shown by your votes and letters to the Eyrie. Four stories are in a neck-and-neck race for second place as the current issue goes to press: *The Opener of the Way,* by Robert Bloch, *Doom of the House of Duryea,* by Earl Peirce, Jr., *The Tree of Life,* by C. L. Moore, and *The Lost Door,* by Dorothy Quick.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE DECEMBER WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
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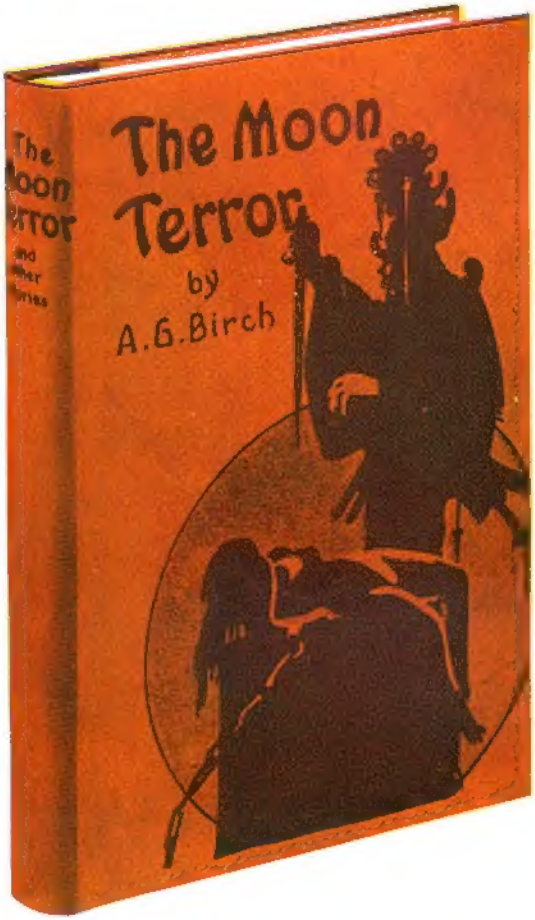

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